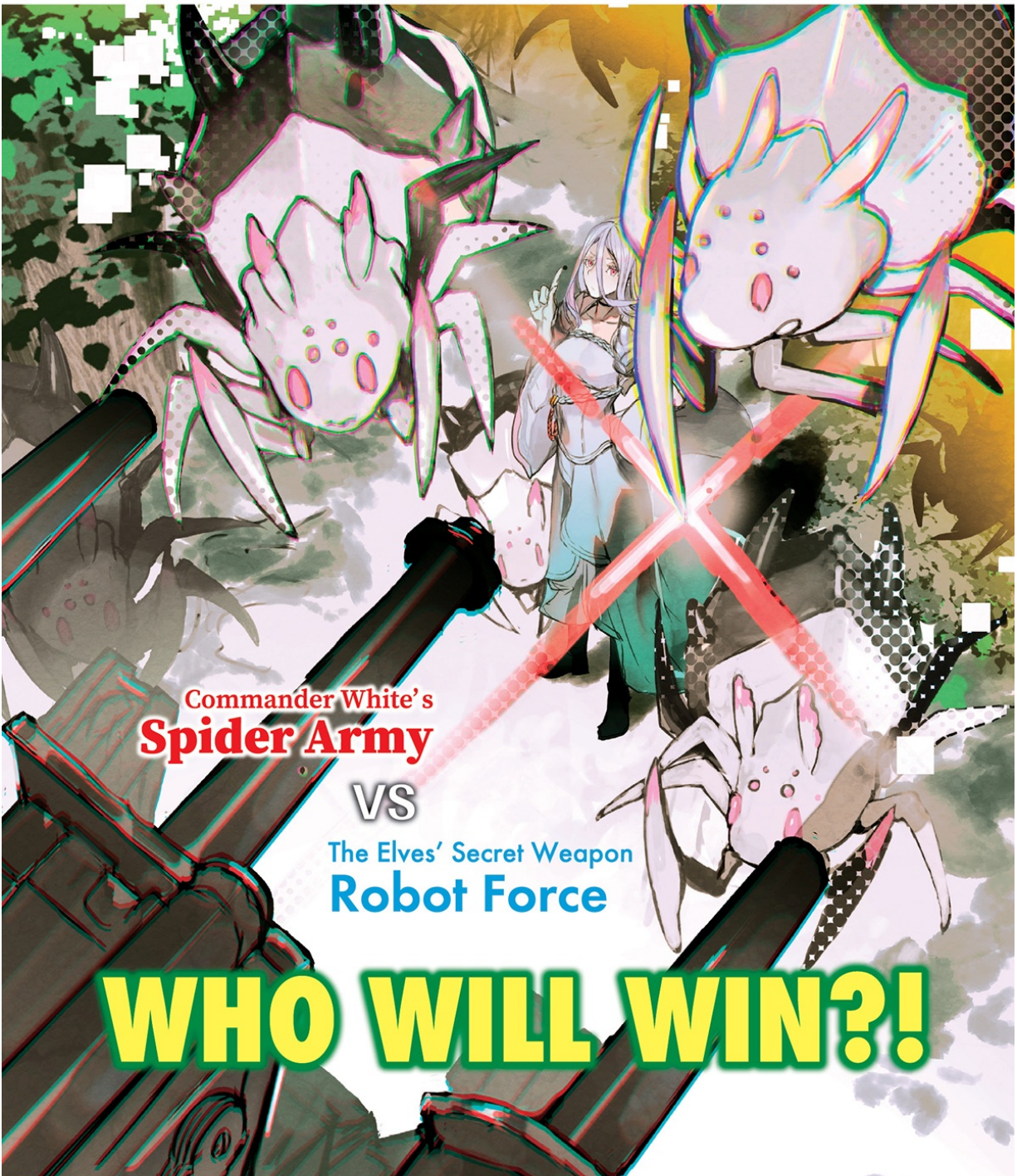




So I'm a Spider so What?

14

OKINA BABA
Illustration by
TSUKASA KIRYU





So I'm a Spider, so What?

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New York

Copyright

So I'm a Spider, So What?, Vol. 14
Okina Baba

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Cover art by Tsukasa Kiryu

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THE LORD WHO HAD NO NAME

Every day was spent lying in bed.

I could never get up and leave.

Twenty-four hours a day I was connected to several tubes that provided me with essential nutrients.

I was just a laboratory animal, with no apparent reason for living.

That was all I was, nothing more.

But then...

“Hello. My name is Sariel. And what is your name?”

...that person reached out her hand to me.

“...A...riel...?”

“Ariel? What a coincidence. Your name sounds just like mine.”

I was only trying to repeat her name, but since my voice was raspy, she misunderstood what I had said.

That trivial reason was how I got my name.

But I’m fine with that.

Because it’s the name *she* gave me.



BEFORE THE BATTLE

Off in the distance is a huge expanse of trees.

The Great Garam Forest.

As the name implies, it's a ridiculously large forest.

Even from this far away, it stretches in either direction as far as the eye can see.

We members of the demon army, disguised as the imperial army, are currently marching toward that forest.

Or more specifically, toward the elf village at its heart.

It's time to settle the score with Potimas, our longtime enemy.

Natsume and the imperial army have already arrived at its border, where they're cutting a path for the rest of us.

Thanks to an, um, expansion pack that I generously added to his brain, Natsume now does whatever I say.

And with his handy-dandy Seven Deadly Sins skill "Lust," he's brainwashed the top brass of the empire into doing whatever *he* says.

So he's been able to bring the imperial army all this way, and we in the demon army are basically going along for the ride, disguised as part of the imperial army.

Demons don't really look any different from humans, after all.

Since we're all decked out in imperial army duds and boldly marching in broad daylight, it's been surprisingly easy to get away without being found out.

Besides, we already got our story straight with the people who would normally be the biggest pain if they did find out: the Word of God religion, which has encompassed most of humanity.

They also happen to see the elves as a mortal enemy who must be

destroyed at all costs, after all. Nothing would make them happier than the demons and elves fighting it out.

I'm sure they're not thrilled that we're borrowing the imperial army, humanity's main defense force, in the process, but they obviously decided that it was worth the possible sacrifice if it meant crushing the elves, or more specifically their leader Potimas.

So we don't need to worry about the Word of God turning against us in this battle.

We're not perfect allies now or anything, but it's a temporary truce, and an equally temporary alliance.

The enemy of my enemy...you know the rest.

Which means we can focus all our energy on destroying Potimas without worrying about anyone else.

It's finally time to settle things once and for all.

...And yet.

Even with this crucial showdown looming before us, the mood is weirdly relaxed.

"Ooooh~"

"Right here? Is this the spot?"

In our horse-drawn, or rather spider-drawn carriage, my voice cries out as the Demon Lord mercilessly attacks my weak spots, sounding like she relishes it immensely.

Just to make things clear in advance, we're not doing anything dirty!

It's just a massage!

And I don't mean *that* kind of massage, I mean a literal, health-related, perfectly normal massage!

It's not dirty in any way!

IT'S NOT DIRTY IN ANY WAY!

I'm saying that twice to stress how serious I am!

Look, I've been putting in serious overtime setting the stage for this showdown for ages now, really busting my butt.

So as a show of gratitude, or something, the Demon Lord is personally giving me a massage.

And I gotta tell you, it feels great.

"Ahaaa~"

As the Demon Lord's hands skillfully find the spots that feel best, I can't

help but let out a few noises, okay?

You'd never guess it, but the Demon Lord is actually super multitalented.

She's a great cook, too.

Since she's lived such a long time, she's picked up all kinds of tricks, much like you'd from a wise old granny.

"Hiyah!"

"Guh?!"

"Who're you calling an ancient hag?!"

"I didn't say—gwuh?!"

As if reading my mind, the Demon Lord hits me with a shiatsu attack!

I didn't call her a hag!

I called her a granny, but that's all!

Besides, it's true she's lived a long time! That's just a fact!

"Hiyah!"

"Hoomph?!"

Her fingers apply even more pressure!

Excuse meeee? Miss Demon Lord?

You know your stats are around ninety thousand on average, right?

If you really wanted to, you could crush a person into a pulp with your fingers alone. You do realize that, don't you?

So please don't go poking at my pressure points with that kind of strength!

If you hit anyone else with those Fingers of the North Star, they'd probably go "HIDEBU!" and explode into a puddle of blood, manga-style!

So basically, we're messing around in our spider-drawn carriage, but I imagine most people would question if we should really be acting like this before such a major battle.

But hey, we've taken care of all the setup we could manage, and since the demon army is currently on the move, there's not much else we can do.

Sure, we could try and speed the army's progress along, but Natsume's imperial army is stuck up ahead because of the forest anyway.

We can't very well march through the whole forest in such huge numbers, so they should be in the middle of clearing a nice path for us right about now.

Normally I imagine it'd be pretty tough to cut a path through this

massive forest big enough for a whole army, but with the stats and skills that exist in this world, logging is a relatively simple task.

If I really wanted to, I could unleash a killer fist or two of my own, and blast the trees out of our way easily, roots and all.

Even without going that far, the imperial army is using its various strengths to cut through the forest faster than would ever have been possible on Earth.

Still, it's obviously gonna be a lot slower than marching across level ground.

In other words, there's no point rushing the demon army when the imperial army is still in that process anyway, because we'd just catch up to them.

Which would be a problem.

Because the majority of the imperial army doesn't know that we're the demon army.

Natsume's brainwashing is really only in effect on a small amount of the top brass; most of the soldiers are just doing as they're told.

Naturally, there's no reason for those soldiers to know that the other unit following behind them is actually the demon army.

They just think we're a normal part of the imperial army.

Now, given that the demon army really is wearing the imperial army uniform and everything, I don't think anyone would figure it out from far away.

But if we actually met up with them, we wouldn't be able to hide that something is off.

For one thing, the demon army doesn't normally wear this uniform; we just threw them together in a hurry for this particular campaign.

Up close, I'm sure it'd be clear that our troops aren't used to it, like when you can tell a new employee is wearing a suit for the first time.

But there's a way more obvious discrepancy than a minor detail like that.

Demons speak their own language, after all...

As soon as they overheard a single word of that language, it'd be game over, man...

Not to mention that we're riding in a spider-drawn carriage right now!

I'm pretty sure they don't have those in the empire!

What kind of a carriage uses arch taratects instead of horses...?

Using something this ridiculous looking is definitely gonna give away that we're not a normal army.

So yeah, we have to make sure we don't catch up to the imperial army.

Which is why we're taking our time with the march.

Besides, it's safe to assume that the battle we're heading into is going to be a tough one. It's not a bad idea to relax while we can instead of wearing ourselves out for no good reason.

What would be the point of showing up physically exhausted and mentally drained?

That's why the Demon Lord and I are taking it easy and encouraging the demon army to do the same by slowing their pace: to conserve energy.

So what about the imperial army up ahead, you ask? Well, they're basically sacrificial pawns, sooo...

All we really need them to do is thin the elves' numbers and disturb their ranks a little bit.

There's no way an army of ordinary humans can contend with the elves' real strength, anyway.

As long as the imperial army can thin out the surface part of their forces, then they've done their duties well enough.

If they can draw out the elves' real strength, namely the mechanical weaponry Potimas is hiding, that would be even better.

And sadly, if they accomplish that, the imperial army's gonna get decimated...

To be totally honest, I think most of their soldiers are gonna die.

If they're already doomed, what's the point in worrying about their exhaustion and all that, y'know?

Nope, we just need them to part the waters for us, so to speak.

Or the trees, in this case.

"Mm..."

At that moment, the Demon Lord's hands stop their massaging.

"...Again?"

"...Mm-hmm. So it would seem..."

The Demon Lord pulls away from me and takes her seat, looking somewhat annoyed.

Then she starts talking to herself.

“Hello? Ah, okay... Mm-hmm...”

To an outside observer, it might look like she’s lost her mind, but she is actually conversing with someone.

It’s not like she’s receiving some weird signal that only she can hear.

...Although I guess it might be, in a way.

But, well, you know...

The Telepathy skill lets you have a sort of phone-like conversation with someone far away, but in this case...she’s talking to Vampy.

At the moment, Vampy is traveling with the imperial army, and apparently she’s reeeally bored since they’re stuck cutting through the forest.

And since she’s bored, she’s started sending us Telepathy calls at incredibly frequent intervals.

Not only to the Demon Lord, but to Mera and Mr. Oni and so on just as frequently.

If you calculate based on how often she’s been talking to the Demon Lord, doesn’t that mean she’s been talking to someone with Telepathy at every waking moment?

How needy can you get?!

Sure, Vampy probably doesn’t know anyone in the imperial army, and she’s not exactly the type to try and make friends on her own. So I’m sure she’s bored with no one to talk to, but still...

Phelmina’s with her, but those two get along like cats and dogs.

...Hmm?

Wait a second.

Wasn’t there one more person traveling with Vampy?

That guy who fell madly in love with her at the demon academy, chased out and screwed over his own fiancée Phelmina to make himself a bachelor, and on top of that begged and pleaded with Vampy until she finally made him a vampire, and thus her underling?

His name’s Wald, but hoo boy.

According to my calculations, Vampy is spending most of her time using Telepathy to bother the rest of us, which means that she’s refusing to converse with Wald, who’s presumably right next to her...

That’s rough, buddy.

He threw away all kinds of things to become a vampire out of his love

for Vampy, and this is how she treats him...

Then again, since Phelmina is one of the things he threw away, maybe this is just karma?

Hrmmm...

His attachment, or rather obsession, is certainly a bit stalker-y, and someone who's secretly super antisocial like Vampy wouldn't know how to handle someone coming on so strong.

Even though *she* comes on super strong to the people she likes...

Luckily for me, I've lost all my skills, so she can't contact me with Telepathy.

The Demon Lord, Mera, and Mr. Oni are just gonna have to deal with Vampy's boredom on their own.

They're all really nice deep down, or they wouldn't answer her in the first place.

...Although maybe they're just using that as a distraction, too.

After all, we're about to face Potimas himself.

To be totally honest, there's no way of knowing if all of us will survive.

I definitely don't think we're gonna lose, that's for sure.

I've made an almost unnecessary level of preparations to ensure our victory.

But there's no such thing as an absolute guarantee.

Just like I've been preparing for all I'm worth, I'm sure Potimas has been doing the very same.

In fact, he's been doing that for ages and aaaages, since long before we reincarnations were born into this world.

I still don't know all of Potimas's secrets.

So there's no telling what might happen.

Just to be extra clear, I seriously don't think we're gonna lose.

But I can't say for sure that there won't be *any* losses.

In the worst-case scenario, I might be the only survivor.

That's how intense this fight is probably gonna get.

Maybe Vampy has picked up on that, too...

"Demon Lord."

"Hmm?"

"Give Vampy a message for me."

"What is it?"

“Don’t worry, we’re gonna win.”

The Demon Lord blinks back at me for a moment, but then she grins and starts talking again.

“Message for ya from White. ‘Don’t worry, we’re gonna win,’ she says. Aww, isn’t it nice of her to try to comfort you in your time of need, widdle Sophia?”

Excuse me.

Did I ask you to say that last part?

Judging by the smirk on her face, this is obviously a premeditated crime, that jerk.

“Oof.” The Demon Lord winces and tilts her head. “...She yelled at me and hung up.”

I can absolutely picture Vampy spewing a rapid-fire volley of insults and hanging up in a huff.

She’s so easy to read, that one.

In spite of her high stats, Vampy is pretty simple-minded deep down.

No idea how she turned out like this...

I’d like to have a word with whoever raised her.

“Aww, she’s sooo cute.”

The Demon Lord barely stifles a laugh.

...Come to think of it, she was basically Vampy’s substitute parent in her infancy, huh?

That totally explains how she ended up such a weirdo.

“Hiyah!”

OWWWW?!

The Demon Lord flicked my forehead!

Again, if you did that to anyone but me, their head would fly right off!

“You were thinking something insulting again, weren’t you?”

Grrr!

I can’t even claim that’s a false accusation because she’s right!

“Y’know, White, at a glance you seem hard to read, but it’s actually very easy.”

The Demon Lord gives an exaggerated sigh.

...It’s not like I try to be particularly hard to read, but it’s still kinda surprising to hear that.

“What are our chances of winning this next battle?”

Her expression turns serious as she asks this.

I guess that means we're done joking around.

So I give her my honest assessment.

"One hundred percent."

"...Then what are the chances that we survive?"

"....."

By "we," I assume she means herself, Vampy, Mr. Oni, Mera, and the puppet spider sisters.

The rest of the masses probably don't count in this case.

"Since you didn't answer right away, that must mean the chances aren't 100 percent. See? Easy to read."

I don't know how to respond to that.

"You really are too soft on the people you care about, White."

The Demon Lord smirks.

But her expression quickly turns serious again.

"But you'll have to drop that softness for this battle in particular."

"....."

"This is war. There will be casualties on both sides. And we're betting our own lives on this, too. If we die in the process, that just means we weren't strong enough."

"What, so you don't need my help?"

"I didn't say that. But you shouldn't go overboard trying to help us. Just focus on making sure we win."

...It's not like I don't understand what she's trying to say.

But even so...

"If I can help you, I will."

"...Then I'd better make sure I don't cause you any such trouble."

I don't think I can bring myself to abandon the Demon Lord and the others.

I know she thinks I'm being soft, but if anything, this is for my own sake.

I don't want to be left with regrets or anything like that.

So I amend my statement:

"Our chances of winning with everyone surviving are 100 percent."

I won't accept any other kind of victory.

Let's do this.



B1 REMINISCE: FIRST MEETING

The beginning of my romance with Sariel wasn't terribly interesting.

No, I suppose it was a rather impactful encounter, enough that it might be interesting to some.

But I feel the need to state in advance that there was no romantic element present in our first meeting, just in case that is what anyone was interested in.

Unfortunately, it was not love at first sight, or any such flight of fancy.

My first meeting with Sariel was impactful in a very different way.

Not in a romantic sense, but rather, a more literal sort of impact.

A direct impact, if you will.

Since she knocked me to the ground the very first time we met.

Impactful, is it not?

The world before the system was implemented was a very different world entirely.

Its appearance, its inner workings, and everything in between.

Perhaps this is obvious, but without the system, there were no skills or stats.

This meant that people were weaker on the whole, but as there were no monsters or any such thing either, they did not need to be strong.

As they could not use magic, science developed instead; buildings were constructed tall enough to pierce the heavens, smooth and solid streets connected across the natural ground, and automobiles filled those streets to bursting.

If the people of those times could see how life is in this world today, I imagine they would think that time had gone backward.

With the help of skills, people whose knowledge still remains, and so on, we have not gone entirely backward, but I am sure such differences are only tangible to those of us who knew the time before, like Ariel, Dustin, and me.

No doubt Potimas pays no attention to such things.

Other than that, I suppose reincarnations might notice.

Before they were reborn here, it seems they lived on a planet with a fairly advanced civilization as well.

Perhaps some of them have also noticed the occasional remnants of the technologies we once had, which do not seem to fit with our current way of life.

The system was programmed to make books and other such recording mediums deteriorate faster to eliminate such things, but it cannot erase what has been handed down over generations by word of mouth and so on.

As if to prove that even a species as weak as humans can resist a powerful god like D...even in the tiniest of ways.

Although I doubt that was the humans' intent. This is just wishful thinking on my part, I'm sure...

Ah, but I digress.

At any rate, things changed so drastically that one might doubt that this is the same world as before.

And it was not just the world that changed, but myself as well.

I was a prideful person at the time, though it may be strange to say so myself.

I firmly believed that humans were inferior creatures, and never doubted that for a second.

In my defense, I will clarify that the same could be said of all dragons.

I do not mean the monsters that are called such in this current world, but true dragons, such as myself.

We true dragons are a powerful species, promised that we can reach godhood from the moment we are born.

As a result, we tend to genuinely believe that dragons are a superior race, and all others are beneath us.

Now that I have encountered the ultra-powerful god known as D, I no longer believe this with such confidence, but at the time there was never a doubt in my mind.

Thus, it did not amuse me to see the inferior race of humans spreading across the world as if they owned the place.

Why did the top-ranking dragons not use their overwhelming might to subjugate these humans?

I did not understand.

For a dragon, I am still relatively young, but back then I was even younger.

I suppose you could call it the arrogance of youth.

So when a dragon child was kidnapped by a measly human, of all things, you can imagine that I was extremely displeased.

In those days, dragons kept to themselves in a small dominion.

Of the ruling dragons, many of them were dissatisfied with this way of life.

But for dragons, the rule of seniority is absolute.

If an elder dragon gives an order, younger dragons must obey it.

We suppressed our displeasure and obeyed the commands of the older dragons.

The years a dragon has lived directly correspond with their strength.

Unlike other creatures, the strength or weakness of a parent does not determine that of the child.

Which is why all elderly dragons were respected, and children were treasured and treated equally.

Dragons live so long that their average lifespan cannot be predicted, and individually strong dragons hardly ever have children.

Because it is such a rare occurrence, dragon children are raised with great care.

And stealing such a priceless treasure from us was bound to invoke incomparable wrath.

I had no personal connection to that child; we had never even met.

But even I felt my blood boiling.

So you can only imagine the parents' rage.

It would have been no surprise if they went about destroying human villages indiscriminately, searching for their child.

Perhaps that is exactly why I, an unrelated individual, was assigned to

keep watch over the child.

Observation only, not rescue.

According to the elder dragons, “As the child was stolen by man, it stands to reason that man must do the rescuing as well.”

Otherwise, there would be no more justification for dragons to tolerate humans.

Upon hearing this, my honest reaction was, “Is there really any need to tolerate them?”

At the time, I thought we should simply destroy a human town or two to set an example.

But I could not disobey the elder dragons’ orders.

Instead, I was to monitor the kidnapped child, as a safety net just in case any danger might befall them before humans could rescue them.

It was a criminal syndicate that had kidnapped the child.

Dragons are a skillful race. As soon as we realized the child had been kidnapped, we immediately found out the culprits.

Then we contacted the nation where those criminals were hiding and demanded that they rescue the child themselves.

Humans know how terrifying dragons can be.

And they know what it means to steal a child from dragons, too.

Back then, I thought of the kidnappers and the rescuers alike as mere humans of the same ilk, but in retrospect, the kidnappers must have been out of their minds.

Any human with the slightest good sense would know better than to kidnap a dragon child.

It was only because this group lacked any sense at all that they were able to resort to such madness.

The humans who kidnapped the dragon child were, simply put, idiots.

Which is why they were being used.

As I would learn much later, the mastermind behind this foolish kidnapping was none other than Potimas.

He was using the crime syndicate to research the transcendent race known as dragons.

He was even careful enough to put several other organizations and individuals between himself and the perpetrators, so that we would not identify him as the one behind it all.

That man knew perfectly well what happened to those who incurred the wrath of dragons.

Otherwise, he would not have taken such care to ensure that we wouldn't find him.

It is hard to say whether this makes him bold for meddling with dragons, or a coward for taking such cautionary measures to hide from us.

Either way, because of this incident, he was able to get his hands on a bit of body tissue from a dragon: hair and scale fragments from the kidnapped child.

He used the tissue to create a chimera, but that is a story for another time.

I could not pardon the perpetrators, even if they were being used by Potimas.

That is what it means to lay a hand on a dragon.

Desperate to avoid being caught up in the consequences, the nation where the crime syndicate was hiding hurried to take countermeasures.

They had to recover the stolen child safely before anything terrible happened.

But if anything, I was hoping that the perpetrators *would* try to harm the child.

If they did, I would have good reason to blow them away, and this entire nation along with them.

I was ordered to keep watch in case any danger befell the child. If it looked like any harm might come to them, I was to protect the child by any means necessary.

If those conditions were met, I would be permitted to use force.

I excel in spatial conjuring and could easily teleport to the child's side in an emergency.

Unless anything highly unusual occurred, I should have no problem getting there in time.

So rather than the incident ending peacefully, I hoped that I would have the chance to show these humans what would happen if they tried to harm a dragon.

That is how much irrational, pent-up anger was in my mind at the time.

And to add to that...

"Hey, buddy. Don't you know this is our turf?"

This encounter only added fuel to my burning rage.

My mistake was choosing a dark, inconspicuous alley from which to keep watch.

Disguised as a human, all alone in such an alley, I must have looked like perfect prey to those ill-bred buffoons.

Soon I was surrounded by good-for-nothing human youngsters.

Groups like this seem to exist in any world, any era.

An inconvenience, though I did not think so at the time.

My hand moved before I could think.

My anger was already at its boiling point, and in those days, I did not distinguish between humans.

The ones who kidnapped the child, the ones attempting to recover them, and the ones who surrounded me at the time were all just “humans” to me.

And now those humans were threatening me.

I needed no further reason to attack them.

The young delinquents were probably only thinking to threaten me and steal my wallet and must not have imagined that I would suddenly try to kill them.

Certainly, they would never have dreamed that I was actually a dragon.

And before they could realize any of that, my fist was already swinging toward them, about to rip them to pieces faster than they could even realize they were dead.

But my fist never reached them.

Because someone grabbed my arm from behind before I could strike.

“...?!”

Instinctively, I tried to hit whoever had grabbed me with my free hand.

But they blocked my backhand chop, producing a shock wave.

It sent the delinquents flying, but I had no time to worry about that.

Because the shock wave knocked me off my feet as well.

For a moment, I didn’t understand what had happened. I simply found myself on the ground, looking up at the sky.

“Warning. I cannot permit physical interference with the native species.”

The person responsible looked down at me and spoke in a flat, mechanical voice with no audible trace of emotion.

“Hostile action detected from dragon toward native species. Such actions would conflict with the authorized mission. Further attempts will

result in elimination.”

It was a merciless declaration.

The speaker knew I was a dragon yet stated that she would eliminate me if I took action.

And she was powerful enough to make good on those words.

This is the reason that dragons did not attempt to rule the world, even though they considered themselves a superior species.

Because there was an even stronger being that protected the native life.

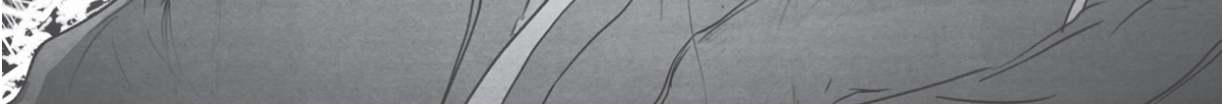
Namely, the one they now call a goddess: Sariel.

During our first encounter, we immediately attacked each other, and I was knocked to the ground and informed that I would be eliminated.

That was my first meeting with Sariel.

See? Not romantic in the slightest, is it?







Interlude

POTIMAS'S BEGINNING

I cannot accept this.

Why must people die?

Why is there no way to avoid it?

Death is the end... The end of one's very existence.

I find it hard to accept such a thing.

I do not want to die. Indeed, I am afraid of dying.

Why do the other humans accept death so readily?

Because it cannot be avoided? Because it is our fate?

Foolish. Absolutely foolish.

They go on living their carefree lives, making no effort to avoid death.

Their indolent ways make me sick.

I refuse to simply accept fate and wait for my death.

I will find the key to eternity.

An immortal life in which I need not fear death.

I swear it.

No matter what it takes.



THE STARTING BELL OF THE FINAL BATTLE

In the midst of the dense forest stands a huge barrier, completely out of place in nature.

The Demon Lord, the puppet spider sisters, and I—six people in total—stand in front of that barrier, away from the rest of the demon army.

Ahead of them, the imperial army has finally reached the outer edge of the barrier that covers the elf village.

All we need to do is get rid of this barrier somehow, and we can invade.

Although that's kind of the problem.

This barrier is *ridiculously* tough!

How tough, you ask? Tough enough that it wouldn't even budge if it took a full-force breath attack from a queen taratect.

What, you think that example is oddly specific?

That's because I've actually tested it out, of course.

See, the Great Garam Forest is known for one other thing besides being home to the elf village.

Namely: it's inhabited by a queen taratect.

Yep, a member of the very same species as my infamous mother, who lived in the Great Elroe Labyrinth, lives right here in this forest.

It's easy enough to guess why, though.

It's here to keep watch on Potimas, the Demon Lord's mortal enemy.

The barrier prevents it from doing any harm to the elf village, but by staking out the territory of a giant monster right next door, it can apply pressure nonstop.

Thanks to this queen taratect, Potimas can't drop the barrier even if he wants to.

And in order to avoid walking right into the queen taratect's habitat, the elves have no choice but to depend on long-distance teleportation by way of

teleport gates.

Incidentally, the queen taratect in question has currently been evacuated to avoid getting in the way of the imperial army's invasion.

It's on the other side of the elf village, of course!

In other words, the elves are currently surrounded on both sides by the imperial army and the queen taratect's swarm of spiders.

Sweet!

But wait! In order to carry out that pincer attack, we've gotta get rid of the barrier, which even the queen's breath attack couldn't crack.

This barrier was apparently made with full use of Potimas's stupid forbidden knowledge, and produces a ridiculous level of defense at all times by draining an exorbitant amount of MA energy.

Which means it's been wasting tons of the energy the system has been slowly and steadily collecting. Man, that pisses me off!

Ughhh, I wanna break this stupid thing to bits.

But not now. It's not time for that just yet.

Right now, we're still waiting for our signal.

Because there's something else we have to do before we break the barrier: destroy the teleport gates.

Teleport gates are a long-distance transportation method that anyone can use.

In the case of the elf village, which is cut off by the barrier, it's also their only connection to the outside world.

If we don't destroy the teleport gates, the elves can still escape, even if we've got them physically surrounded.

And then they'll be in some far-off land on the other side of the gates.

Even if we tried to chase them down, we'd be out of luck if they destroy the teleport gate after they've gotten away.

Now, thanks to tracking and investigation by the Word of God religion over many years, they know about a handful of teleport gates.

But we can't say for sure that there aren't more gates we don't know about.

So our plan is to use the teleport gates we *do* know of to invade the elf village, and destroy the teleport gates from the inside.

Luckily for us, the teleport gates in the elf village are apparently all built in one place since they have to have a way around the barrier.

Because of the way the barrier is built, they have to make all the gates in one spot, where they temporarily make a hole in the barrier that connects to the outside to send the elves on their merry way.

I discovered this while I was investigating the barrier.

Since this is Potimas we're talking about, I can't say for sure that there aren't more teleport gates elsewhere, but I didn't find any other weak spots in the barrier, which makes me think those are the only ones.

Which means it's possible to destroy all the teleport gates in one go.

So yeah, the signal we're waiting for is a report that our guy has successfully infiltrated the barrier and destroyed the teleport gates.

And who's leading this secret mission? A reincarnation named Kusama.

His full name in our old lives was Shinobu Kusama.

And his unique skill as a reincarnation is apparently "Ninja"...

That's totally just based on his name, right?

Isn't that a little cheap?

Damn D, slacking off on the job as usual...

Anyway, turns out Kusama was reborn into the family that runs the Word of God religion's secret service.

They're basically ninjas who serve the Word of God.

Even Potimas couldn't extract Kusama from a house with such a strong influence from the church, which means he's the one and only reincarnation who hasn't had any encounters with the elves in his life.

Although considering the unique circumstances he was born into, I doubt he's had a particularly peaceful time, either.

For instance, he was thoroughly trained as a member of the secret service, and his unique skill Ninja is a perfect fit for that, making him surprisingly strong.

Well, strong by human standards, anyway.

But it's enough that a little breaking and entering to blow up some teleport gates should be a piece of cake for him.

By the way, we're using Mr. Oni's handmade exploding swords for the "blowing up" part.

They're called magic swords, but really they're just bombs.

Plus, they're explosive enough that just one of them could wipe out all of the teleport gates without issue.

And Mr. Oni is just mass-producing those, y'know?

He looks like a swordsman, but he's more like a demolition expert, huh?
That's quite a scam if you ask me.

I even used my threads to make him a classic Japanese-style getup that would go with his katana and everything.

A sword-wielding samurai with horns!

But he actually just blows things up.

No waaay.

Anyway, turns out Kusama and Mr. Oni were pretty good friends back in their previous lives; when we were meeting with the Word of God church, they met up a few times and renewed their old friendship, I guess.

Maybe Mr. Oni gave him the exploding sword as a parting gift kinda thing?

I wouldn't know, since I have no old friends to get reacquainted with!

Not that I'm jealous or anything!

As I get weirdly defensive in my own internal monologue, I peer inside the barrier.

It's transparent enough that you can see through it from the outside.

That means visible light rays must be able to pass through, and I assume oxygen and stuff too, since it's presumably not airtight.

You'd think that would allow for a certain amount of shenanigans, but I'm sure the Demon Lord and the Pontiff and such have already tested out any theories I might come up with, meaning there must be some kind of countermeasures in place for that sort of thing.

Man, what a pain-in-the-ass barrier.

Although busting it open will be a walk in the park for yours truly!

This is the plan for once Kusama successfully destroys the teleport gates:

First, I'm gonna pop the barrier around the elf village like a balloon.

We've set it up to look like the imperial army used some new kind of massive magic to destroy it, which should make for a good distraction.

Then Natsume and the imperial army will advance.

He's pissed off more than a few people, so I'm sure the elves will rush to destroy him right away.

At the very least, I'm guessing Yamada and friends will head over to fight him.

In fact, I kind of *need* them to do that.

I've got to avoid letting Yamada run into the Demon Lord, no matter what.

Hopefully, though, I can count on Güli-güli's clone Hyrince to take care of that.

Hyrince, you've got this, right, buddy?

I'm counting on you to steer him in the right direction, mm'kay?

At any rate, while the elves have their eyes on the imperial army, the demon army will start advancing, too, and attack the elves from the side.

Mera and Mr. Oni are in charge of directing the demon army, and Vampy is up ahead with the imperial army. No problems there.

Phelmina's with the latter, too, just in case anything goes wrong.

Even if the elves have more forces than we were expecting, that crew can stick it out and destroy them without any major losses, I'm sure.

Frankly, I'm pretty sure Vampy and Mr. Oni could handle it all on their own.

And then, while the elves are forced to fight the imperial army and the demon army on two fronts, I'll throw in a taratect troop free of charge.

It even comes with a queen!

One queen alone is a force to be reckoned with, and then there are fourteen archs.

And fifty-one greaters.

Plus a whole bunch of others.

Honestly, wouldn't that lineup alone be enough to take out the elves?

That'd kill most people for sure.

I'm expecting a nice horrific battlefield straight out of hell itself, during which the Demon Lord and I will sneak into the heart of the elf village.

Mostly to scoop up the reincarnations, murder the real Potimas once and for all, that kinda thing.

If we can take out Potimas's real body, then this war is as good as won.

We've already gotten rid of all the fake bodies he had outside the elf village.

I'm pretty sure the one Vampy destroyed in the kingdom was the last of them.

We had to do a little coup d'état in the kingdom and put Yamada and friends through hell just to get at that last Potimas clone, but hey, what choice did we have?

It's Potimas's fault for getting up to no good in the kingdom.

Blame him, not me.

Anyway, it was worth all the trouble, because we were able to get rid of Potimas's influence there, including his clone body.

Even if we missed one, Potimas can't transfer his main self into a substitute body like I can.

He's only got one real body, and the rest are just fakes that he operates from afar.

So if we can just kill the real thing, any extra clones won't make a difference anymore.

The imperial army, the demon army, and even the taratect troop are all decoys.

As the first decoys we're sending in, the imperial army will probably take a considerable amount of losses, but they've been disposable from the beginning anyway.

All we really need them to do is bait out the elves.

Then we just use the demon army and the taratects to keep them busy.

Amid all that chaos, the Demon Lord and I will make our move, the real objective.

The two of us are honestly stronger than all those other armies combined, anyway.

And at the moment, we're glaring daggers at each other.

"No matter what you say, White, this is the one thing I won't budge on."

"I told you, no deal."

The air crackles with tension between us.

The Demon Lord's puppet spiders, who are riding in the same carriage, are trembling with terror at the electric atmosphere.

We continue staring down each other, neither willing to give up.

What are we arguing over, you ask? The question of who gets to finish off Potimas.

I wanna beat that guy to a pulp, especially after what he's done to Ms. Oka.

That bastard fooled the teacher who saved me in my previous life, worked her to the bone to gather the reincarnations for him, and even put a parasitic piece of his soul in hers so that he can use her as a host body later!

You think I'm gonna let him off easy after all that?

As another point in my favor, I'm also stronger than the Demon Lord, making it safer for me to dispose of Potimas since we still don't know what he might be capable of.

On the other hand, the Demon Lord knows that full well, and still insists she wants to fight him.

Sure, she's got a very long history of Potimas screwing her over at every turn.

I'm sure her feelings run far deeper than mine in that regard.

But this is Potimas Harrifenas we're talking about here.

The guy who's been opposing the entire world on his own behind the scenes, all this time.

Based on our battles thus far, I predict that Potimas's power is at least as strong as the Demon Lord's.

If there's even a tiny chance of the Demon Lord getting killed over something this stupid, I'd much rather take the safest route possible.

But even after I explained all this, the Demon Lord still refuses to budge.

Now, if that were the whole story, it wouldn't be such a big deal.

I'm certainly dying to rip Potimas apart with my bare hands, but I'm sure the Demon Lord feels the same way, and probably much more intensely.

I wouldn't mind letting her deal the final blow.

If she would let me help before then.

"At least let me lend a hand."

"Nope. This is my fight. No one else is allowed to intervene. Sounds pretty cool, right?"

This is the problem.

The Demon Lord insists that she's going to settle things all on her own.

Without an ounce of my help, or any of her subordinates'.

She wants to put an end to their long-standing enmity, one-on-one.

Even though she just said earlier that it's not like she doesn't need my help.

"I know I'm being unreasonable. But I won't change my mind on this. I've got to settle things with Potimas all on my own. He's the one who..."

The Demon Lord trails off, but there's grim determination in her eyes.

When she gives me that look, it makes me feel like I'm the one in the

wrong.

“You know you might die, right?”

“Of course. It’s not like I’ve got much time left to begin with, anyway. If I die here, I won’t have any regrets. Especially since I know that you’d finish Potimas off for me if that happened.”

I can’t believe she can say something along the lines of “if I die, at least Potimas will go down with me” with a straight face.

Ahh...

No waaay.

I heave a long sigh.

How am I supposed to stick to my guns after she says something like that?

The Demon Lord is willing to bet the entirety of her long life on challenging Potimas.

She’s laying her pride on the line.

I can’t exactly take that away from her, can I?

The worst part is, she definitely put it that way knowing full well that I’d have no choice but to back down.

“You’d better not.”

“Huh?”

“You’d better not die. If you die, I’m gonna ditch this whole stupid world without a second thought. You have to promise to stay alive so I won’t have to do anything that irresponsible. All right?”

“...You got it, boss.”

I can’t bear to look at the Demon Lord’s teary-eyed smile as she salutes me, so I turn away.

Luckily, at that moment, I catch sight of a perfectly timed explosion in the distance.

Looks like Kusama succeeded in blowing up the teleport gates, then.

Now I’m free to bust this barrier wide open.

And so, I pull out a certain item that I’ve been keeping in an alternate dimension.

“Wha—?”

The Demon Lord stares at it blankly, a question mark practically hovering above her head.

I can’t say I blame her.

Since what I pulled out is a baseball bat.

It's one of the gag gifts I picked up when I searched D's house.

When you swing this bat, you're guaranteed to hit a home run on any ball.

Which sounds like a vaguely familiar magical effect, but that's not all this particular bat does.

If you hit a living thing with this bat, you'll also get a home run.

I know that sounds like nonsense, but basically, it'll send the target flying.

Like, ridiculously far, against all the laws of physics.

And yet it only causes a tiny bit of damage.

No matter how far they fly, and how hard they hit the ground afterward, it'll only hurt a tiny little bit.

No matter how tightly you grip the bat and how hard you swing it, the damage doesn't go past a certain threshold.

Yeah, it doesn't make any sense.

But as absurd as it is, it really can send things flying like no one's business.

Gag gift or not, it's still a genuine god-tier artifact straight from D's home.

But the effect is extremely limited—it only works on balls and living things.

The ball thing makes sense, but why living things are considered a valid home run target is a total mystery to me...

Either way, it absolutely won't work on anything else.

So hitting the barrier with this bat won't do a damn thing.

But! I've got a workaround for that!

Next, I produce a giant white scythe, my primary weapon.

My scythe in my right hand. The bat in my left.

I take a deep breath...

"Fusion!"

...and smash the two together!

"Uhhhh..."

Behind me, the Demon Lord utters a groan of disbelief.

Okay, I know it *looks* like I'm being so stupid that you're probably tempted to pretend you don't know me, but this is actually an insanely

dangerous thing I'm doing, all right?!

Silly or not, one of these is a godly weapon handmade by D.

And I'm trying to fuse it with my main weapon.

Honestly, the bat is technically a better item than the scythe.

(Even though it's just a stupid gag gift...)

Which means this particular fusion is actually really, really hard.

Why am I doing it so last-minute? Well, by my calculations, even if I fail, I should at least produce enough power to destroy the barrier.

If that happens, the bat will probably disappear, and my scythe will stay the same, or get weaker in the worst-case scenario.

But it's still worth a shot.

Because if I succeed, I can make my scythe even stronger!

So c'mooooooooon!

Please wooooork!

The scythe and bat glow in my hands, and the bat starts getting absorbed by the scythe.

I can tell an insane amount of energy is flooding into my scythe.

All that crazy energy prompts me to hold the still-glowing scythe aloft.

It's just about time for the imperial army to use their massive magic.

All I have to do is give this thing a good swing at the same time.

All right, then.

White steps up to the batter's box!

A swing...and a hit!

It's a home run!

Can you believe it, folks?!

The scythe cut through the barrier like butter and smashed it to bits, no sweat!

...Man, that bat must've been ridiculously powerful to destroy that barrier so easily.

I check on the scythe in my hand.

I don't feel the same amount of enormous energy as before.

Hrm. It seems like the fusion worked in theory, but maybe it only strengthened it a little bit?

I guess breaking the barrier probably used up most of the energy, and the rest was absorbed by the scythe.

It does seem a little bit stronger than before.

Well, I'd say we can call that a success.

"Uh, White? What was that bat with the extremely threatening aura just now?"

"Don't you realize there are lots of things in this world you're better off not knowing, Demon Lord?"

I would prefer that the Demon Lord not ask too many questions about the deus ex machina item D created.

The more useful it is, the more it probably screws you over once you've used it.

I mean, this is D we're talking about, y'know?

Isn't it terrifyingly likely that it's super cursed or something?

I did check it over very thoroughly for that kind of thing before I used it, but still.

Knowing D, it wouldn't be too surprising if she found a way to hide something that I wouldn't pick up on until it was too late.

But still, I'm not gonna *not* use it.

It's just so damn useful!

And if I hadn't actually used that bat to destroy the barrier, it probably would've taken way longer.

Anyway, right now all that matters is taking action.

I use my Panoptic Vision to get a bird's-eye view of the elf village, where they're all totally freaking out about the barrier disappearing, while Natsume is triumphantly leading the imperial army to march right in.

Taking a glance at the reincarnations' area, it doesn't look like the elves are going to do anything to them, at least not yet.

Hmm, well, I guess I can leave them alone for now.

"All right, let's go."

We'd better take care of our business while the elves are distracted by the imperial army.

So it's time to move.

I take the lead, with the Demon Lord and company following close behind.

If I were on my own, I could teleport all over the place, but the Demon Lord can't do that.

Besides, I'm pretty sure he'd pick up on the disturbance in space and figure out what we're up to if I tried teleporting.

It's possible he's already on to us anyway, but it's equally possible that he's not. We might as well try to be stealthy about it.

We push onward, picking areas without any elves around.

I zip through the forest just slowly enough for the puppet spiders to barely keep up.

At the same time, I focus on searching the entire elf village with Panoptic Vision, but I can't figure out where Potimas is.

He must be very carefully hidden, then.

It's typical of him to be so paranoid.

But the fact that I can't find him still gives me a hint as to where he might be.

If I can't see him after searching this carefully, that means he's somewhere I can't search.

There's no way he's not in the village, though.

Potimas would never use such a powerful barrier only to risk leaving his real body outside.

He has to be somewhere inside the safety of the barrier.

And also somehow in a place where I can't find him.

With that much figured out, I can easily guess where he might be.

Underground.

Since I couldn't locate him after a thorough search aboveground, he must be below.

So now, we have to find the passage that leads down there.

We won't have to look very hard, though.

I didn't see any of the super-advanced robots that Potimas definitely has anywhere aboveground, so they must be underground along with the real Potimas.

There's no way he'll be able to withstand this invasion without using them.

He's bound to send out the robots at some point.

Then we just have to bust into wherever the robots appear from.

That should lead us right to the real Potimas.

Sure enough, the ground suddenly cracks open a few miles ahead of us, and robots start shuffling out one after another.

Wowzers.

These things look like they came straight out of some space-war movie.

Four arms, and four legs.

The four arms all end in guns, too.

These are some super sci-fi robots, sticking out like sore thumbs in this fantasy world.

As soon as the robots emerge, they start gunning straight for us.

Looks like the enemy's already located our little team, then.

The robots use their four legs skillfully to bound through the forest.

Boy, that's fast.

In terms of stats, their average is probably around five thousand per unit?

That kind of speed is a fart in the wind to the Demon Lord and me, but it could give the puppet spiders a run for their money, maybe.

The puppet spiders' stats average over ten thousand, but we don't know what kind of firepower those robots are loaded with, and more importantly, there's a bunch of them.

"Incoming," I tell the Demon Lord shortly. "I'll deal with it."

Then I speed ahead, and before the robots even come into visible range, I activate a conjuring.

Black bullets sail straight toward the robot corps.

As soon as they hit, the robots go down, falling apart immediately.

...Huh.

Is that the best Potimas can do?

No, surely not.

I'm sure he's got more up his sleeve than this fragile junk.

But either way, now we've found the entrance to the underground.

I ignore the broken remains of the robots and move forward, arriving at the area the robots emerged from.

The hatch hurriedly tries to slide shut, but I stop it with sheer force.

In fact, I kinda broke the hatch.

Beyond it is a steep downward slope.

Potimas is down here somewhere.

I signal the Demon Lord with my eyes, and she nods silently and heads down.

From here on out, the Demon Lord is on her own.

That's what she wants, after all.

We won't interfere.

But I did send a miniscule spider clone after her, just to watch over the battle.

Don't die on me, Demon Lord.

Meanwhile, it's time to get down to business.



THE LORD WHO WAS ONCE A LAB RAT

Infuriatingly enough, the man called Potimas Harrifenas has played an inextricable part in a large portion of my life.

From the moment of my birth to the present day, I've always been haunted by that man's shadow.

The reason is simple, though I am especially loath to acknowledge it: He is my father, if only by blood.

Certainly he has never once treated me as a daughter.

It doesn't matter now, and I have no way of confirming this anyway, but I suspect he never even recorded my birth in his family register or anything of the sort.

In other words, he refused to acknowledge me.

That goes without saying, since to him I was nothing more than a lab rat for his experiments.

My earliest memory is of lying in a bed in a laboratory, or something of the sort.

Obviously, I don't remember the details at this point, but I know I was lying in that place for a very long time.

Or maybe it would be more accurate to say that I had no other choice but to lie there.

I was bedridden day and night, without the ability to even sit up.

By the time I had any self-awareness, I was already in that condition.

Fortunately, I naturally picked up the ability to understand language, probably because the television was always on in that room.

Since Potimas generally chose educational programs for me to watch, I picked up a decent amount of knowledge without ever leaving my bed, too.

Although I'm sure that was just part of his experiment, to see if I would develop intelligence at a normal human rate.

Yes, it was all an experiment.

That is the reason I was born.

I never knew my mother.

In fact, I don't know if I even had one.

Because I am not just an ordinary human.

I am a chimera, the subject Potimas was studying at the time.

A chimera is made when factors from different creatures are combined to create a new species. I am the result of one such experiment.

When I say Potimas is my father, I don't mean that he impregnated my hypothetical mother, and she later gave birth to me.

I only mean that I am a chimera that was based on Potimas's genes.

I still don't know if I was born in a test tube, or if I really did have a mother. At this point, I have no way of finding out.

Though I suspect it is closer to the former. I assume my creation did not involve a mother's womb.

Based on my physical makeup, I doubt any mother of mine would have survived carrying me to term.

It's the same reason that I was forcibly confined to a bedridden lifestyle.

Namely: I am venomous.

I was evidently created using DNA from various creatures, with Potimas's genes as a base, but it seems that the strongest influence of all came from the DNA of a spider.

My body has the ability to produce poison.

There was no way of knowing at the time that this came from the spider; my appearance was completely human, and I didn't have any other spiderlike traits.

I only learned this much later, when the system was put into place, and many of my skills and titles were spider-related.

In those days, all I knew was that the poison was eating away at my body.

Yes, while my body produced poison, it unfortunately did not have the ability to process that poison.

Thus, my body was constantly being corroded by my own poison, making it impossible for me to live a normal life.

The only way my body could survive at all was to lie in bed and receive nutrients and poison-neutralizing medicine through a constant IV drip.

I wasn't truly living. I was merely being kept alive.

And I was treated as nothing but a lab rat all the while, occasionally having blood samples taken and such.

Potimas doesn't have a shred of emotion or empathy. Perhaps he would have eventually euthanized me once he finished collecting data from my body.

Fortunately, I was rescued by Lady Sariel before that happened.

In a rare moment for Potimas, he apparently made some kind of major blunder not long before I was rescued, and the resulting investigation spread worldwide.

Then other chimera children like me who were being used as lab rats were found all over the world, and Lady Sariel led the Sariella Foundation in taking them in.

Because many of the other chimera children had unusual circumstances like me, normal orphanages couldn't take them in, and medical institutions had to be involved.

At first, society itself was also unsure how to handle chimeras like us, and so there were often fights over citizenship and such, too.

And some of the children had unique traits that could be dangerous, useful, or both, making the handling of chimeras a delicate matter.

Thus, out of all the interested parties, it was the Sariella Foundation that was chosen to handle the affair: a charitable organization that didn't belong to any particular nation.

The Sariella Foundation had ties both to health care and orphanage administration, and because they had no regional affiliation, they could be completely neutral.

They certainly wouldn't use the chimeras as living weapons.

It was the perfect organization to entrust with their care.

Some nations tried to keep useful-seeming chimeras for themselves, but since the president of the Foundation, Lady Sariel herself, always showed up on the scene in person, there were few instances of this succeeding.

Of course, it was only after the system was put in place that we discovered that there had been a few exceptions after all.

Even Lady Sariel and the Sariella Foundation couldn't save all of them.

But even so, Lady Sariel gave it her all to save as many of us as she could, to take us all in.

Even chimeras like me, who were likely on the verge of death.
Both physically and mentally.

It may have ended in tragedy, but the fact remains that Lady Sariel gathered us up and saved us.

The chimera children lived together in a nameless orphanage.

They were my brothers and sisters.

And those days in the orphanage with them were by far the happiest times of my life.

Which is exactly why I can't let Potimas get away with stealing that precious happiness.

I will destroy him with my own hands.

...No matter the cost.

“How pathetic.”

A deeply unpleasant voice echoes from some hidden speaker.

“Of course that was the best you could do. The only one I need to be cautious of is Güliedistodiez. Did you really think you could defeat me, when I have prepared myself for battle against nothing short of a god? That is why you will never be anything more than a pathetic little girl.”

Is it my imagination, or is he talking more than usual?

Perhaps I should be happy about that, at least.

“Still, we have known each other for so many years now. It would be rude to hold back against you in your final hour. I believe you have earned the right to be defeated by the full extent of my power. So I have deemed you worthy of using this Gloria Type Ω, which I created to fight Güliedistodiez.”

The voice over the speaker coolly gives an assessment I didn’t ask for.

Before my eyes, looking down upon me, is a mechanical weapon.

“What an emotional moment. Our long years together will finally come to an end, here and now. I can finally wipe the slate clean without a trace. Farewell to you, my greatest failure.”

Then the machine swings its sword down at me.



Interlude

POTIMAS'S EXPERIMENTS

All humans die.

There is no way to change this.

So what can one do to avoid death?

The answer is simple.

One must simply become a being who transcends humanity.

Fortunately, there are creatures called dragons in this world, who are clearly superior to humans.

And from my observations, it seems that members of their race do not expire.

If I could integrate dragon genes into a human...

And so I began to experiment.

Sometimes by creating clones of myself.

Sometimes by using cloning technology to create children with my genetic makeup.

And sometimes with orphans without any relation to me.

But it has yet to succeed.

I am still a fry cry from the eternal life I seek.

But I will continue to experiment as many times as it takes to reach that goal.

Fortunately, I have no shortage of test subjects.



B2

RUMINATE: THE LOST ANGEL AND THE DRAGON

If you're wondering what happened after that impactful first meeting between Sariel and me, the answer is "not very much."

I sensed the difference in our strength and surrendered immediately.

The humans who were working to rescue the dragon child happened to succeed at precisely that moment, and so we parted without any further clarification.

I had to collect the child from the human rescuers, and Sariel vanished as soon as she judged that the incident was over.

We had no further communication after that.

And I assumed we would never see each other again.

Sariel and the dragons were essentially in a continuous cold war.

We rarely interacted unless one side deliberately tried to contact the other.

In other words, young dragons such as myself had no official interactions with Sariel.

But unofficially was a different story.

I had never been knocked off my feet by anyone but a fellow dragon, you see.

So I was now very intrigued about Sariel.

I suppose our meeting was just that impactful to me.

Of course, at this stage, I hadn't yet developed any kind of romantic feelings.

I do not believe that I am the sort of person who would fall in love with someone merely because they punched me, or anything so perverse.

If anything, I imagine it was more out of self-preservation than mere curiosity.

Since I had spent my life in the small community of dragons, the being

called Sariel was the first enemy I had met from the outside world.

It is a natural instinct to prepare oneself against enemies, is it not?

And so, I investigated Sariel and began observing her.

Much later, a certain someone shocked me by describing this as “stalker”-like behavior, but in retrospect that memory too makes me smile.

I do not know how long exactly Sariel has been on this planet.

She was here long before dragons came to this land, that much is certain.

Poring over human history, one can find images of a Sariel-like figure here and there.

In other words, she was already here by the time humans began to record their history.

So what is Sariel, exactly?

The answer is that she is an angel.

In fact, she is a lost angel who strayed from the rest of her kind.

What is an angel?

I cannot give a clear answer to that question.

What is a dragon? What is a human?

These answers are just as impossible to define.

If I were to put aside such philosophizing and answer more practically, I suppose I would list the traits of the species known as “angels.”

In short, angels are a race that war against the gods.

For some reason, they consider it their mission to destroy any and all godly beings, and thus they are locked in an endless conflict.

I am told that angels will attack any god, no matter their affiliation.

Though this is only hearsay, as I do not know any angels other than Sariel.

Why do angels view gods with such hostility?

This, too, I cannot say.

In truth, there are many mysteries surrounding the race of angels.

Even the angels themselves do not have all the answers, or so I hear.

It is said that angels suddenly appeared in ancient times, long, long before I was born.

Some even theorize based on this sudden emergence, and their devotion to their mission, that perhaps they were created by some higher being.

Even wilder theories suggest they were made by the universe itself as a sort of antibody, a defense against the gods who, despite existing within the universe, could very well threaten to destroy it.

At any rate, I certainly do not know the truth.

That is all I can say as to the origin of angels. But as far as their specific traits, the most notable by far is their awe-inspiring level of power.

Angels are strong enough that their race persists even after making enemies of gods of all kinds, including dragons.

I am told that even the weakest of angels exist in the territory of gods and attack them in groups.

And Sariel was particularly powerful even for an angel.

In fact, the real reason that the elder dragons who once walked this earth as my superiors chose to live in relative obscurity is so that Sariel would not destroy them.

Evidently Sariel was strong enough that she could have chased all the dragons of this world to extinction.

And her mission was to protect the native species of the planet.

This mission is the sole reason why dragons could not carelessly destroy humanity.

Angels are mysterious beings, who are given missions that drive their existence.

They will go to any lengths necessary to achieve these missions.

Indeed, their every action is so purely devoted to their missions that they can be rather inflexible.

Generally, it seems that most angels complete their missions and move on to a new one, but in some very rare cases an angel will adhere to a single lifelong mission.

In those cases, they may attempt to continue a mission they have already completed or continue fighting for a mission that is no longer possible to achieve, in a way that an outside observer would see as completely fruitless.

And these angels who have strayed from the others and act on their own are known as “lost angels.”

Sariel was one such lost angel.

Her mission was to protect the native species of the planet.

Long ago, a non-native god must have attacked this world and attempted to rule it.

Sariel was dispatched in order to prevent that.

I imagine that once she chased this god away, Sariel's mission should have been considered complete, and she would have taken on a new mission and moved on to another world.

But something must have gone wrong, because Sariel remained here.

And continued her mission of protecting the native species.

There is very little lateral communication between angels.

One could even say there is none at all.

Thus, if an angel is lost, another angel will not come to collect them.

Even an angel with superior strength like Sariel will simply be left alone.

From the point of view of dragons, who communicate with one another and virtually no one else, this is an almost baffling lack of cooperation between members of the same species.

Although that may sound rich coming from a lost dragon like myself, akin to a lost angel.

At any rate, because of this lack of communication between angels, Sariel was left to her own devices for a long time, while the native humans she was protecting spread their influence far and wide.

It was then that the dragons saw this and quietly migrated.

At this point, there is no way of knowing what the elder dragons were thinking back in those days, but perhaps they were hoping they might get the chance to win Sariel over to their side.

We dragons do think of ourselves as the ultimate life-forms, but we do not necessarily ignore other species.

Because we are confident in our place at the top, we feel that it is our duty to guide those below us.

I am sure this would sound prideful to anyone but a fellow dragon, but dragons are very magnanimous toward anyone under our protection.

We show no mercy toward those who oppose us, but for any we have taken under our wings, we promise them the utmost protection.

And because our lifespans are so long, we sometimes take time to gradually strengthen our control over long periods.

Even here, I am sure there was a plan to gradually win over humanity, spread the rule of dragons, and eventually make it so that dragons commanded all of the native species that Sariel was protecting.

Were that to pass, then Sariel would automatically fall under the command of dragons along with those in her protection.

In reality, we only had control over a very small dominion, so this would be a very ambitious undertaking; but to dragons, whose lifespans are near-infinite from the perspective of humans, it would only seem like a moderate amount of time.

The eras of man come and go so quickly from our point of view.

In just a few short generations, people can transform into something else entirely.

If the present humans dislike dragons, we need only improve their view of us gradually through their children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and so on.

Though unfortunately, Potimas turned the world upside-down and ruined everything before we could actually achieve that...

I do think about it sometimes.

What would have happened if Potimas had never changed the way that this world works, and Sariel and the dragons continued their strange equilibrium over time?

Most likely, Sariel would have stayed the same.

I believe a certain someone had high hopes for me in that regard, but I am sure one such as myself could never have caused Sariel to change.

If the world had continued on unchanged all this time, I am sure Sariel too would still be protecting the native species as she always did.

And if that were the case, where would I be?

...I cannot say.

Somehow, it is impossible for me to imagine where such a situation might have led me.

Indeed, had this world not changed so drastically, I would not be who I am today.

It is because of all of those events that my current self took form; had they not occurred, I would be a different person entirely.

Small wonder, then, that I cannot imagine it.

Either way, there is no point contemplating a future that might have come to pass.

In the end, it is only a hypothetical, one that will never occur in reality.

...I seem to have gotten off topic again.

Hmm. Has Dustin's bad habit rubbed off on me as well?

Well, I suppose that is enough talk of angels, fallen angels, dragons, and the like.

So then, what exactly did Sariel's protection of the native species look like?

As I mentioned before, depictions of a Sariel-like individual can be found throughout human history, but the details of her arrival and related anecdotes vary greatly.

In some cases, she performs miracles to save people, while in others she is treated as a witch.

Among the earliest of tales, she even warns humans against overhunting animal populations, and eventually punishes them for it.

In these times, Sariel was mindful of the ecosystem balance, keeping an eye on all of the native species equally.

But at some point, her priorities shifted toward favoring humans.

Angels may be devoted to their missions to the point of blindness to all else, but it is not as if they are without their own thoughts and individual selves.

So it is no great surprise that her interest might begin to lean toward humans, who can communicate their thoughts.

Delving further into human history, there are passages that suggest Sariel was trying to determine how best to deal with humans.

Her largest-scale interventions took place primarily in ancient history; over time, these instances became few and far between.

She must have decided that it was more efficient to match her activities to those of humanity rather than use her powers like a god.

By the time I first met Sariel, she was scarcely using her godlike powers in an official capacity at all and had instead formed a charitable organization called the Sariella Foundation, through which she carried out her mission.

The Foundation was active throughout the world, not belonging to any particular nation.

Its activities included general medical care, support for underprivileged regions, establishment of educational institutions, administration of orphanages and nursing homes, and so on and so forth.

The scope of her charity was remarkably broad.

Because the leader of the Foundation sought to protect humans, the dominant native species, she was not interested in profits or anything of the sort.

As a result, the international community as a whole trusted her completely, and because the top brass of a select few nations knew of her true nature, the Sariella Foundation had an enormous presence.

However, even if her goal was not to make a profit, the activities of the Foundation did cost a considerable sum of money.

The funding for their charitable activities was covered by various donations.

And the biggest of those donors was a billionaire by the name of Foduey, feared at the time as the “Demon Lord of the business world.”

Thanks to the vast sums of money he contributed, the Sariella Foundation was able to continue its generally unpaid, essentially volunteer activities.

To the people of the world at that time, I am sure the Sariella Foundation seemed like salvation from a goddess.

Which would not be entirely incorrect, since the organization’s leader Sariel really was a godlike being known as an angel.

Sariel was immensely popular with humanity.

However, at the time, I saw her activities as far too indirect and inefficient.

If she wished to protect humanity, she should have simply ruled over them with brute strength, in my young self’s opinion.

Sariel was powerful enough to do just that, and the Sariella Foundation already had the organizational capability as well.

If a dragon were in a similar position, I am sure they would have enacted such a rule without hesitation. I can say that much for certain, as I too subscribed to the standard thought pattern of dragons at the time.

However, I now realize that such thinking was misguided.

Dragons thought to create peace for lesser races by giving them a life of safety inside of a birdcage; Sariel encouraged humanity to be self-reliant, and only offered a helping hand.

Our fundamental goals were ultimately quite different—perhaps even opposites.

At the time, I failed to understand that.

But even now, I cannot say which goal was correct.

I do not think the dragons' way of doing things was wrong, even if I have since been estranged from them.

And yet, I do not think Sariel's approach was wrong, either.

Protection, or independence?

The only answer would lie with the humans of that time, and how they would feel in one position or the other.

But one would likely have to experience both before coming up with a proper answer.

And experiencing both of those opposites would be very difficult.

On top of that, even if one *could* do so, their ultimate answer would surely vary from one individual to the next.

While humans are all of the same species, their individual thoughts and feelings differ drastically.

Attempting to lump them all together in broad strokes inevitably fails.

I am sure Sariel made that same mistake many times.

For dragons, even if we fail on occasion, we will simply choose to enforce our dominion with sheer strength.

Dragons are soft on those under their protection, but we do not show mercy to those whom we oppose; anyone we have bared our fangs toward even once will never be taken under our wing.

There is a clear line drawn there: dragons are above, and all others are below.

That is the way in which dragons rule.

But Sariel evidently did not approve of such methods.

Rather than oppressing people with her power, she chose to walk alongside them.

Because her goal was to protect the native species, controlling them with force would have seemed a foolish approach.

It would involve cutting off those she was meant to protect, after all.

A politician may have to do just that from time to time, but Sariel's mission was to protect humans, not to guide them.

Understanding that much explains Sariel's decisions to a certain degree, even if I cannot agree with all of them.

But unfortunately, I had no way of knowing that at the time, nor did I have any doubt that the way we dragons did things was correct, so Sariel's

methods only frustrated me.

And so, I quite foolishly went to lodge my complaints with her in person.

I suppose this was another mistake of a reckless youth.

But that is how my interactions with Sariel truly began in earnest.



SHOWDOWN: ANNIHILATION

Once the Demon Lord heads into the underground lair, I wonder what to do next.

It isn't as if I don't have anything to do—quite the opposite: There's a lot that I could and should be doing.

In fact, I have so many options that I can't decide where to start.

First, I decide to assess the battlefield as a whole.

Using Panoptic Vision, I get an aerial view of the elf village.

Near the border, where the barrier once was, the imperial army and the elf army are clashing.

The imperial army seems to be struggling pretty badly.

Naturally, the elves have a serious home field advantage in the middle of the forest.

It's tough to move freely, which is why we had to chop down trees to march through in the first place.

Once they started fighting, the plants and roots underfoot prevented them from using their full strength.

Since the imperial army usually fights on level ground, I guess they're not accustomed to this kinda thing.

They can't even keep their formations up since they're surrounded by trees and all.

And because of their skill setups, the imperial army soldiers are firmly divided into separate branches.

Swordsmen fight with swords. Shield bearers fight with shields. Mages fight with magic.

They all have their roles, and they fulfill them to the letter.

Normally, they plan their formations accordingly to use each branch to

the fullest.

...But that ain't gonna work out this time, clearly.

The swordsmen can't get close enough to fight, the shieldsmen's shields are being avoided by the elves' arrows and magic, and the imperial army mages are having trouble hitting with their spells because all the trees are in the way.

Meanwhile, the elves are using the trees to their full advantage.

They jump around from branch to branch, easily evading the imperial army.

Then they use their precise arrows and spells to take down their enemies.

They're used to fighting in the woods.

Actually, judging by their skills, it seems like they actually specialize in that.

Looks like they're using Spatial Maneuvering to hop around in the trees and utilizing bows or magic to target their enemies without getting too close.

Then they dodge counterattacks or use the trees as a shield.

Even if both sides had roughly the same numbers, it'd be difficult to deal with an opponent who's optimizing the terrain this thoroughly.

The imperial army is big, but they can't exactly make use of that in the tight space of the forest, or push their way through with sheer numbers.

What they need, then, is strength that renders the home field advantage moot.

At the moment, the only squadrons that are faring well are the main force led by Natsume, and one that's led by a familiar-looking old mage.

Looks like the same geezer who was Julius the Hero's teacher.

You can see why he had that position from the way he's mowing down the elves with rapid-fire barrages of magic.

The protection of the trees?

That means nothing to this old man!

His spells are piercing straight through them.

From the looks of things, the old man's still got plenty more where that came from; he could probably reduce the elves—and the entire forest—to ash if he really wanted to.

As long as they don't bust out the robots or anything, the old man should

be fine.

But the rest of the imperial army are getting their butts handed to them.

It does seem like they've done a bit of damage to the elves' side, too, but things aren't looking awesome.

My initial hope was that the imperial army would deal some serious damage to the elf army, then the demon army would finish them off, but at this rate the elves are gonna take down the imperial army and still manage to put up a fairly serious fight against the demon army.

Admittedly, I wasn't expecting much out of the imperial army to begin with, but it's still kind of a bummer that they're even less useful than I hoped...

Either way, if the robots come out, even our primary forces of the demon army won't amount to much. I guess the efforts of the imperial army don't matter either way, then.

But the demon army has Mr. Oni and Mera, and even the imperial army has Vampy and Phelmina.

Even if it ends up being a tougher battle than expected, I doubt we're going to lose.

That is, as long as the elves keep *their* primary forces—the robots—off the playing field.

So that's how the imperial army's faring. On the other hand, the queen and the taratect swarm are totally crushing their side of the elf army.

I mean, these taratects have been living in the forest this whole time.

Since I was able to climb walls and stuff even before I got the Dimensional Maneuvering skill, it's obvious that the taratect species fare well in terrain with lots of obstacles.

The more surfaces there are, the easier it is to spin webs, for one thing.

Even if the elves are accustomed to fighting in the forest, they can't be as good at it as the taratects that make their permanent home there.

Plus, the taratects have the queen, and several other strengths that totally outclass any of the elves.

A group of elves can probably take down a greater, but an arch or anything stronger will be a hell of a lot tougher.

And that's just if it were one against many.

In this case, there are more taratects than there are elves, which makes for a pretty one-sided slaughter.

The elves are basically getting swallowed up by the wave of spiders without slowing them down in the least.

Gotta say, watching an endless sea of spiders teeming out of the forest is enough to give you goosebumps.

...All righty. No problems there, then.

Next, what's going on inside the elf village?

First, I take a peek at Yamada and company.

Looks like they were trying to protect the area with the teleport gates.

But Kusama got the jump on them and destroyed the gates.

Realizing that the barrier was about to go down, they all hopped on Shinohara in dragon form and are heading for the border.

Looks like they're headed toward Natsume's approximate position.

Meanwhile, Natsume himself is locked in a battle to the death with Ms. Oka.

Vampy's right there, so I doubt Ms. Oka's life is in any serious danger.

If it were, I'd go ahead and kill everyone involved, anyway.

If Yamada and friends are heading for Natsume, they'll have to contend with Vampy, and they won't be running into the Demon Lord. Should be fine to ignore them.

And the elves inside the village don't seem to be doing much.

The normal ones, who I'm guessing don't know about the robots, are holing up in their houses looking freaked out.

Most of the capable fighters are out on the front lines, leaving only minimal security and non-combatants.

No robots to be seen.

Hmmm. Maybe I should jump on this chance?

I could probably wipe out all the elves in the village before the robots come out.

The race of elves are all Potimas's spawns and underlings.

So all of them have to be killed, with the exception of Ms. Oka.

That's just a fact.

Non-combatant, child, elderly, or otherwise, we've gotta annihilate every last one of them.

And right now, those targets are all hiding out in their homes without any real protection.

Can I really let this opportunity pass me by?

Nope, not a chance.

I know what I've got to do, then.

Woo-hoo! It's hunting time, baybeee!

I head toward the elves' neighborhood, taking the puppet spider sisters along with me.

With our speed, we can get from the outskirts of the elf village to the residential area in a matter of moments.

Next thing you know, we've arrived at our goal.

There's an elf guard keeping watch, but Ael chops off his head before he can react.

...Is it just me, or did he not even realize what was happening until he was already dead?

They haven't had much of a chance to shine lately, but the puppet spiders are still monsters with stats in the ten thousands, after all.

And *because* they haven't been in the spotlight for so long, they're totally raring to go.

Even now, Ael looks highly pleased with herself for having beheaded that guard.

It's cute and all, except for the fact that she did just behead someone.

Well, if they're so eager to show off, I might as well put these sisters to work.

"Spread out."

On my order, the four sisters scatter.

It's better to separate them for maximum efficiency, I think.

Even if any robots show up, I don't think any of them would lose in a one-on-one fight, and they're fast enough to flee to safety if they get attacked by a group.

Guess I'd better get to work, too.

I pick a direction opposite the spider sisters and dash in a straight line.

As I go, I pop out a bunch of battle clones all the while.

No matter how strong the puppet spiders are, there's too few of them to lock down the entire elf village.

So my battle clones start going on a rampage every which way to make up for it.

As long as the robots don't show up, the elves have no way to defend against the battle clones or the puppet spiders.

The residential area is big, but it shouldn't take that long to get it under control.

Whether they're up against a battle clone or a puppet spider, the elves aren't strong enough to even put up a fight.

It'll be a slaughter.

And all in a few spare moments between movements, too.

It's easy enough just to lop off someone's head as you run by.

Meanwhile, I cut across the residential area toward the center of the elf village.

Here, I'm gonna stop distributing battle clones for now.

I'm headed for the area where the reincarnations are being kept.

If I don't secure their safety, Potimas might try to do something to them when he gets backed into a corner.

It doesn't seem like he's done anything like that yet, but I'll feel better if I make sure they're safe before he gets a chance to try.

So I arrive in the area where the reincarnations are being held, and pop them all into a separate dimension without a word.

I'm guessing they'll have no idea what's going on.

They didn't even see my face beforehand.

...What, you think that's lazy?

Look, we're in an emergency right now...

And they'll technically be safest in this alternate dimension, sooo...

It's definitely not because it'd be a pain to meet the other reincarnations face-to-face or anything silly like that.

It's not, okay? I swear.

They're set up with enough food and water and stuff for a few days, and a place to sleep.

Even if I did die somehow, they'd be sent someplace safe in this world, too.

Although I don't plan on dying, obviously.

Anyway, that takes care of the reincarnations.

Now I can cut loose without anything to worry about.

I turn around and head back to the residential area, where the cleanup is already over.

...Hmmm.

I was so sure that robots were gonna show up before we finished here.

He can't have run out of robots already, right?

Potimas would never settle for such a teensy amount of backup.

And it's not like he's using all his forces to fight the Demon Lord down below, either.

Judging by the view from the super-tiny surveillance spider I sent after the Demon Lord, it definitely didn't look like she was fighting his entire battalion.

Potimas is still saving some strength somewhere.

...So why hasn't he sent out anything else yet?

Doubts still lingering, I land in the center of the residential area.

The puppet spider sisters have gathered here, too.

There's not a mark on them, not even blood splatter from their victims.

In fact, even the swords in their hands don't have a drop of blood on them—what's up with that?

Are you telling me they cut 'em too fast for any blood to stick to their blades?

Man, what's scary is that might actually be true.

Looking around the neighborhood full of elf houses carved out of giant trees, the fairy-tale effect is somewhat ruined by the sea of blood.

Yikes, that's pretty bad.

We haven't completely wiped out the area yet, but the handful of elves who've survived are being hunted down by my battle clones even now.

At this point, I have to assume that Potimas simply decided to abandon the elves on the surface.

But then, as if to prove me wrong, the path through the residential area suddenly splits open, revealing a hole that leads underground.

And a robot comes crawling out.

I still don't get why Potimas let us kill all the elves, but it looks like this is where the real battle begins.

The puppet spiders step forward to take on the robot.

Maybe they're excited to have an actual fight, not just a slaughter, since they haven't had their fill of showing off yet.

I guess I can let them take care of one measly...robot...

Clamorous clanks echo around the area, and a massive number of robots

pour out from the ground.

...Isn't this a bit much?

And it's not just this area. Swarms of robots are popping out all over the elf village.

Even with just a glance at my Panoptic Vision, their numbers are easily in the tens of thousands.

...Seriously, isn't this way too much?

They did seem pretty fragile when I broke some before, but I didn't realize they were mass-produced.

Seriously, who mass-produces fighting robots?

And come on, *this* many?!

The puppet spiders look at one another.

Then they promptly take shelter behind me.

...What happened to all that eagerness from a second ago, huh?!

Well, yeah, I guess that's fair...

These numbers are a bit too much even for them...

They could definitely beat these robots one-on-one, or maybe even one-on-two or -three, I would say.

But this many? No waaay.

Come on, even I wasn't expecting this!

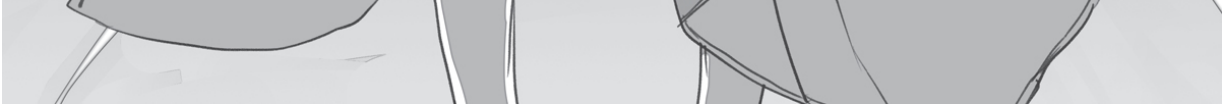
I can protect the puppet spiders since they're here with me, but the imperial army and demon army might be in a bit of trouble.

Hell, this could be bad even for Vampy and Mr. Oni...

As my mind races, the robots point their guns toward us.

And then the muzzles all start spouting fire at once.







THE LORD WHO HAD FRIENDS

“Now, on to our next news story.”

The orphanage living room was very large.

Accordingly, it had a very large TV, which I spent a lot of time watching.

Since I had no choice but to use a wheelchair in my everyday life, I couldn't run around and play like the other kids.

When I was brought to the orphanage, I said goodbye to my bedridden life at last.

But my body didn't magically heal.

After some examinations, intended for treatment instead of experimentation this time, I was prescribed new medication that allowed me to move up from the bed to a wheelchair.

I could even walk on my own a little if I used a cane.

But I still couldn't remove the IVs that constantly provided me with medication and nutrients.

Because my body was still constantly producing venom, I needed the antidote and nutritional supplements to keep me alive.

Ironically enough, my body required more nutrients than the average person in order to keep producing that venom.

You might wonder if it would stop making venom if I stopped taking in nutrients, but no: I would still produce poison, and be malnourished on top of it.

It was only through the combination of the IVs and an easy-to-digest liquid diet that my body was able to sustain itself at all.

Unfortunately, that left little nutrition for my body to grow, which is why I am still small even to this day.

Though technically, it isn't as if I didn't grow *at all*.

Once my body developed and I gained a bit more stamina, I was finally able to move on my own, if only for a little while and with the help of a cane.

Even then, I spent the majority of the day in a wheelchair, which inevitably limited my options.

Watching TV in the living room was one of the few activities available to me.

“This morning, we interviewed Mr. Dustin, President of Daztrudia.”

I did sometimes pass the time with reading, embroidery, and so on, but I enjoyed doing nothing but staring at the screen.

In fact, I felt ill at ease when I couldn't, perhaps because I had done nothing but watch TV before I came to the orphanage.

“I will not permit the use of MA energy in our country. Have we all forgotten the misdeeds of Potimas, the man who discovered it? There are still many mysteries surrounding MA energy. I cannot accept it until we know the potential drawbacks of its use.”

I looked away from the TV and out into the garden, where children with various unique traits were running around playing.

They were all chimeras, created by Potimas's experiments.

I didn't have any ability that was evident from my appearance alone, but over half of the children were visibly distinguishable from normal humans at a glance.

A girl with long, pointed ears was chasing around a boy with green skin.

A pink-haired boy threw a ball in a random direction, and a boy whose entire body was covered in fur jumped higher than an average adult's height and caught it with ease.

Such sights were perfectly ordinary in this orphanage.

It was a rather large place, since it also had hospital facilities to take care of the physical side effects common in chimeras.

The yard was expansive, too, enough that even the chimera children with their superhuman physical abilities could play freely.

Children who had been kept in rooms by Potimas where they couldn't move around were able to play to their hearts' content in the orphanage courtyard.

However, there were some children like me who couldn't join in due to health reasons.

Fortunately, the kids never harbored ill will toward one another; we were all equally close, whether we could move freely or not.

I think it's because we felt we were of the same kind, in the same boat.

Chimeras are all different to the point where we could each be considered our own species, but we all understood that each of us had vastly different traits, and I think that worked to our advantage.

Because we were each so unique, there was never any concept of discrimination.

Perhaps that was just a lucky fluke.

Normal children go to school, and learn the ways of the world there.

Information sources like television don't feel entirely real to children; they have to witness things with their own eyes and ears.

So in a way, the kids in the orphanage were cut off from the rest of the world, and knew little of society and common knowledge.

This wasn't necessarily a bad thing, though, and since the nature of the entire world was soon to change anyway, it would no longer matter if they knew anything about the way things were before.

"While President Dustin has firmly opposed the use of MA energy and prohibited it in Daztrudia, a growing number of other nations have been adopting it..."

As I absentmindedly watched the news at that time, I had no idea that this "MA energy" would eventually plunge the world into chaos and bring on even greater changes.

Even if I had known, I was only a child in a wheelchair. I doubt I could have done anything to stop it.

"Come in here, you naughty kids! It's time for lunch!"

The director of the orphanage stomped into the yard.

She was a pleasantly plump, middle-aged woman, who was formerly a pediatrician.

As one of the Sariella Foundation's full-time physicians, she flew around the world to all sorts of hospitals and orphanages, treating and diagnosing children everywhere.

Since her health and age were beginning to make it harder to fly so frequently, she made a request to the Foundation to be stationed in one place and became the director of our orphanage.

She was excellent with children, especially since she was a former

pediatrician.

“Come on, now! Get on inside! Wash your hands!”

I remember her as a powerful woman with a big personality to match her build.

The kids obeyed, shouting and laughing as they streamed inside.

Lady Sariel was among them too, and must have gotten jostled by the children; her clothes were rumpled and dirty, and for some reason there were several flowers poking free from her hair.

“Fess up! Which of you rascals turned Lady Sariel into a vase?!”

“No. These are presents.”

Lady Sariel calmly objected to the director’s words.

One of the children must have tried to gift her some flowers.

But they went about it poorly and stuck them onto Lady Sariel’s head with the stems still attached, making for a strange impression indeed.

“If you’re gonna give flowers, at least make a crown or take off the stems!”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The young perpetrator responded sheepishly, while the other boys laughed.

Then the director bonked the boys on the head.

“And you lot, getting all covered in filth! The mud on Lady Sariel’s clothes must be your work too, isn’t it?! You’re taking a bath before lunch!”

With that, she seized two particularly dirty children and hoisted them under each arm, lugging them off to the bath.

Everyone was so noisy.

But I was used to this sort of scene by now.

Watching everyone smile and laugh together made me happy.

Compared to the frigid life I’d led all alone in my bed until I came here, life in the orphanage felt incredibly warm.

I only hoped that such warm, happy times would go on forever.

“Protestors are now demonstrating against President Dustin’s position on the use of MA energy.”

But that wish was in vain, for the end was already close at hand.



RUMINATE: BLOCKED BY THE DEMON LORD OF THE BUSINESS WORLD

If we are to discuss my relationship with Sariel, there is someone else I must mention.

Ariel?

No.

I have certainly known her for a very long time now, but in those days, I was only dimly aware of her as one of the children Sariel cared for.

Not to mention that all of the children at that orphanage were very distinctive individuals.

There was the first hero, the first saint, the beast lord, the agitator lord...

All of whom ran the riot shortly after the system was instituted.

By comparison, Ariel was of little note.

After all, she was only a powerless little girl at the time.

It is akin to a miracle that she survived that chaotic period at all.

Though it may be difficult to imagine that for anyone who knows her now.

At any rate, Ariel did not leave much of an impression at the time.

...Let us return to the main topic.

Before Sariel and I began to interact more frequently, there was one man who stood in my way.

To be frank, he made it difficult for me to meet with her at all.

That man's name was Foduey.

Yes, the very same man who donated huge sums to the Sariella Foundation, and was known as the Demon Lord of the business world.

Still, by the time we first met, Foduey was already getting on in years.

His heyday of being feared in the financial world was long since past, and he was spending his remaining years putting a portion of his wealth to use, from which some even smaller portion was donated to the Sariella

Foundation.

Even that tiny percentage of his profits was enough to fund a majority of their activities, which should give some idea of just how vast his overall assets must have been.

If he willed it, he could accomplish almost anything with the power of that wealth.

And he had connections not only in the business world, but the world of politics as well.

It would be no exaggeration to say that his backing was the reason that the Sariella Foundation had such power.

Of course, all that being said, the wealth of a mere human was the most trivial of details to a dragon like me.

Such things only held meaning within human society, after all.

What would a roll of banknotes mean to a dragon?

Nothing at all.

So to me, Foduey was no more than one insignificant human among many.

Until I actually met him, that is.

The first time I encountered Foduey face-to-face was when I went to tell Sariel exactly what I thought of her methods in person.

As I said before, Sariel's way of doing things greatly displeased me.

For a time, I contented myself with observing her, but the more I watched, the more my frustration and irritation piled up, until one day I hit my limit.

Thus, I decided to go straight to the source to lodge my complaints.

I marched straight into a hospital run by the Sariella Foundation, right as Sariel was in the midst of inspecting the place.

Unfortunately for me, she was accompanied by Foduey.

Yes, this was a great misfortune indeed, at least at the time.

When I consider our later interactions, I suppose I would no longer describe it as such, but that is only because of what I know now.

But back then, our meeting was nothing short of a disaster.

In all my life, I have never been mocked so thoroughly by any human, not before or since.

The fact that I was more dumbfounded than angry is really quite humorous in retrospect.

Really, there was good reason to mock me in those days.

Considering my attitude at the time...

“Why must you do things in such a roundabout way?”

Those were the very first words I spoke to Sariel when I found her.

Anyone would take that as an attempt to pick a fight, no doubt.

Or at the very least, the beginnings of some troublesome encounter.

In truth, Sariel simply ignored me and kept walking.

Foduey, who was alongside her, slipped past me as well without sparing me a glance.

“Hey! Stop!”

Naturally, my young self took being ignored as an unbelievable insult, and shouted out to stop them.

Even though I was the one who acted rudely in the first place.

However, at this point I imagine Foduey was only surprised, and not yet furious.

My next words were what sparked his rage.

“You could have saved that child! Why did you let her die?!”

What did I mean, you ask?

This was a hospital operated by the Sariella Foundation.

Sariel herself regularly inspected the place.

And there, she learned that a child she had spoken to during her previous visit had succumbed to illness.

I saw their last interaction by way of clairvoyance.

“Thank you, Miss Sariel.”

“No need to thank me. It is part of my mission.”

“See you next time.”

“Yes, see you then.”

But after they parted ways, Sariel and that child would never meet again.

The child had an incurable disease.

But that is only speaking in terms of human standards.

With Sariel’s powers, she surely could have healed the child completely.

This was the reason that my impatience with her indirect way of doing things finally reached a breaking point.

There were many lives that Sariel could have saved, even without running hospitals and such.

But she chose not to do that.

And yet, she still had the gall to wear a faintly saddened expression when she heard that day the child had died.

How could she react like that when she could have saved the child's life and didn't?

I found it terribly disagreeable, which is why I yelled so angrily.

"Please keep your voice down in the hospital."

But the response to my shout was completely unrelated to its contents.

Though in retrospect, I suppose it was a perfectly sensible way to react.

But at the time, it was the last thing I had expected to hear in response to my question.

Sariel is the only angel I know, but I think I realized at that moment just how impossible those beings are to understand.

"I don't care about that!"

I shouted all the more, trying to cover up my confusion about our interaction.

Then I moved closer to Sariel, and I believe I made some vehement declaration that she could have easily healed the sick if she chose to do so.

"I will warn you one more time. This is a hospital. It is common sense to be quiet in a hospital." Sariel was unmoved. "In addition, this hospital specializes in internal medicine and surgery. Mental illness is outside of our area of expertise, so I recommend that you try a different hospital."

Not content to tell me to be quiet, she calmly insulted me as well.

Even I was stunned into silence by that.

"Pfft!"

Then one man dared to snicker at my stricken reaction.

As you may have gathered from the context, this man was Foduey.

I glared at him. "You inferior creature."

"Ah, excuse me. Though I must say, which of us do you think appears inferior in this current situation?"

...I was very young at the time.

So young that I would openly call a human being an "inferior creature" to their face.

But in this case, Foduey's response was an even harsher criticism.

It was then that I realized I had attracted the attention of the people around me.

A natural result of shouting in a hospital, I suppose.

All of the doctors, patients, and so on within hearing range were staring at me, and looking very put out.

If I may defend myself, at that time, the attention of humans meant nothing to me.

...Not that this is much of a defense.

But in those days, I thought of humans as insignificant creatures.

So I felt no need to waste my time paying any mind to whether they were looking at me.

Then I realized the differences in our perception.

From my point of view, Sariel was a god.

Not a human.

And of course, I myself was a dragon, and not a human, either.

I was speaking with the assumption that humans were of no consequence, but what would those humans think if they heard me without knowing what I was?

Blathering on about gods and claiming that this woman could heal a disease that no doctor could cure.

An incredibly irrational, inconsiderate man.

It would make perfect sense for them to see me that way.

These were the actions of someone who might be better served going to a mental hospital, just as Sariel said.

Since I was disguised, both Sariel and I looked like ordinary humans.

It was only natural that the humans who didn't know any of this would see us that way.

This was my mistake for not paying attention to humans.

But I couldn't very well smooth things over at that point, and I felt no need to do so for a mere human, anyway.

"Such insolence! Do you wish to die?!"

So, I decided to stick to my attitude as a dragon.

"What's this? If you can't win with words, you'll win with violence, hmm? Does a fool who calls his adversary inferior yet cannot outwit him truly think himself the better man? Oh, I see. It's because you don't understand that you are a fool, hmm? Please, pardon me. I have a bad habit of using myself as a standard. It makes it hard for me to understand people whose minds are so much slower than my own. Do forgive me for that. I'm ever so sorry."

...That man was always like this.

It wasn't just that he had a comeback for everything—for every word that was spoken to him, he would return it tenfold.

When it comes to verbally mocking other people, I have never known a human more talented than Foduey.

...Although I question whether that should really be considered a “talent.”

However, his remark about resorting to violence if I couldn't win with words did injure my pride.

If I raised a hand against him after that comment, I would become the fool he claimed I was.

And I was determined not to let that happen.

...Although I didn't realize until much later that I had already lost the argument when he convinced me to think that way.

To think that I allowed a human whom I scorned as inferior to manipulate me with words so easily... I cannot help but laugh at my own absurdity.

“I will hear you out if you'll step outside with me. This is indeed a hospital. As Lady Sariel says, it is no place for outsiders to barge in and cause a ruckus. Or is your mind really so inferior that you cannot grasp such a simple concept?”

“Nngh!”

Then he used my pride to force me to cooperate with his will.

At the time, I really felt I had no choice but to do as Foduey said.

A dragon like me, being commanded by a mere human like him?

It is hard to say whether that reflects more on Foduey as terrifying, or myself as pathetic.

I would like to think that it is not the latter...

...No, I suppose it does not matter now.

There would be little point in my putting on airs of importance now when I am already revealing such unsightly sides of myself.

So, compelled by Foduey, I left Sariel and went outside with Foduey, whose words drove home that fact.

“I must say, you put other stalkers to shame, really.”

“Huh?”

I could not help but gape at him in response.

A stalker?

A human was calling a mighty dragon such as myself...a stalker?

How could one not laugh at this?

"I am asking you to restrain yourself from such excessive stalking. Or didn't you hear me? It appears that 'superior creatures' such as yourself tend to be hard of hearing. That doesn't seem to make much sense from my perspective, but let us assume it is one of the many mysteries of the world. There must be some culture that takes pride in poor hearing that I was simply unaware of, I'm sure. Though I fail to understand the reasoning behind it."

That was my reward for giving a dimwitted response to Foduey's initial statement.

Knowing now that he was actually holding back quite a bit only makes it worse.

"Do not tarnish my reputation. I am not hard of hearing, nor am I any sort of stalker."

"Is that right? Then you must really be a fool if you aren't even aware of it yourself."

"Excuse me?"

A prideful dragon such as I could never blithely accept an accusation of being a stalker.

But Foduey only continued to provoke me.

Were it not for his earlier comment, I would have undoubtedly killed him.

"Oh dear..."

Foduey heaved a dramatic, mocking sigh, as if to test the limits of my rationality.

I very nearly lost control.

But his next words stopped my thoughts in their tracks.

"If you consider yourselves so superior, you should at least learn the basics that we inferior humans consider common knowledge. Wouldn't you agree, Sir Dragon?"

That stunned me into silence.

I had assumed all this time that Foduey was operating with no idea that I was a dragon.

That he could only be so foolish as to act this way because of his

ignorance.

But that was not the case.

He knew I was a dragon, and mocked me nonetheless.

This may seem like a small difference, but it was quite significant.

“You insulted me knowing that I am a dragon?”

“But of course. If there is a reason to mock someone, I will be sure to mock them, no matter who they might be.”

My honest impression at this point was that he was very eccentric indeed.

Humans at the time knew dragons as beings not to be trifled with.

This was likely only a dim awareness, since most of them would never meet a dragon in their lifetimes, but it was still a view common to all of humanity that it would be incredibly foolish to make an enemy of a dragon.

He had treated me as a complete fool all this time, but he was the one being foolish by the standards of human knowledge.

That is the kind of man Foduey was.

Difficult to understand, is it not?

“At any rate, we cannot have a productive conversation as you are now. Please leave for the time being. And do try to study human society at least a little bit before you next return. Perhaps then you will understand why I called you a stalker and insulted you. If you still can’t figure out that much, then I suppose there’s no hope for you. In which case, I must ask that you refrain from ever showing yourself in front of Lady Sariel again.”

He spoke of human understanding in spite of being such a strange enigma himself.

Was it arrogance or just foolhardiness...?

But I suppose only a man such as he could successfully deal with a dragon like me.

At the very least, his words did make me think that I should at least hear him out.

Otherwise, I might never have listened to the words of a human.

If he had calculated all that when he challenged me, I suppose Foduey really was victorious.

This was how I first met Foduey.

It was certainly a rather impactful meeting, as well.

In fact, between this encounter and the one in which Sariel knocked me

out cold, it would still be difficult to say which first meeting was more impactful.

That is how much of a shock this was to my system.

If my association with Ariel has been long yet sparse, you could say my association with Foduey was short yet deep, I suppose.

Though while it was “short” by my standards, it might be considered rather long in comparison to the lifespan of a human.

...Was Foduey not already aged when I first met him?

He was, it is true.

Considering the lifespan of humans at the time, it would not have been surprising if he died of old age before the system was constructed.

But in fact, he carried on vivaciously even after the system was made.

In fact, he went on such a wild rampage that it is still fearfully spoken of in some circles even to this day.

After all, he was the progenitor of vampires in this world.

Hmm? No, when I first met him, he was undoubtedly an ordinary human.

He became a vampire some time later.

And not of his own will, either.

It was an unfortunate incident indeed.

You could say that he was just caught up in a bigger disaster—man-made though it was.

And the man who caused that calamity was none other than Potimas.

Potimas was behind most nasty incidents at that time.

Since Foduey was contributing to the Sariella Foundation, he was bound to come up against Potimas eventually.

It simply happened at a particularly poor time.

But let us discuss the events that led to Foduey becoming a vampire next time we are able to talk.



Interlude

POTIMAS AND CONJURING

There are some phenomena in this world that cannot be explained by the laws of nature alone.

Dragons are a prime example of this.

They can ignore the laws of aerodynamics to fly through the air, and that is only the beginning.

They can appear out of nowhere, and teleport to the other side of the planet in an instant.

There is no way to explain this with science or physics.

These mysteries occur as if by magic.

But while these arts are shrouded in mystery to humans, dragons can use them with ease.

If I could acquire those dragon genes, perhaps I would be able to use those arts as well.

There might be a clue to eternal life hidden among their secrets.

Even this sort of magic is not all-powerful, it seems.

But that very fact indicates that they operate on the basis of some sort of ruleset, a full-fledged system.

In which case, if I could only expose those rules, I might be able to use such arts even without dragon genes.

Even if it does not conveniently contain the secret of eternal life, I do not mind.

I will lay bare the logic of their conjurings, develop them even further, and find a way to link them to eternal life.

But I will need more test subjects for these experiments.



SHOWDOWN: SPIDER VS ROBOT

The muzzles of the robots' guns all start blasting.

As far as I recall, Potimas prefers not to waste bullets and avoids using firearms like these.

But now, they're spraying 'em out like crazy, rules be damned!

A wall of fire closes in on me like a bullet hell game, leaving nowhere to run.

Seriously, if this were a shoot-'em-up, I'd be demanding a refund!

No waaay did the developers expect anyone to beat this!

What is this, an unbeatable boss?

Well, I'm not gonna get beaten here!

So yeah. I activate a spatial conjuring.

And I pop all those bullets right into a separate dimension.

Or rather, I just open up an entrance for them to fly right in of their own accord.

Sent into an empty space, the bullets just whiz around aimlessly, never hitting anything.

The end.

Ha-ha-ha.

Shooting attacks won't work on a master of spatial conjuring like me!

Oh, unless I got shot too fast to be able to activate a conjuring in time, I guess.

But that's probably not gonna happen!

Even the most powerful shooting attack will never reach me if I pop it into an alternate dimension.

How's it feel, huh?

You finally use the bullets you've been refusing to use, saving 'em up like a stingy old miser, and they all get totally nullified?

You mad?

Yeah, you mad.

Ahh, my only regret is that I can't see the look on Potimas's stupid face for myself.

...Okay, I guess there's no point trying to piss off robots, huh? They're not gonna lose their cool no matter what I say.

Not that I was saying this out loud for anyone to hear anyway!

What, you think I should try actually saying it?

Get outta here! Are you telling me to die or what?!

While I'm getting carried away with a one-man comedy bit in my internal monologue, one of the robots actually charges at me instead.

What, they figured out after just one volley that shooting isn't gonna work on me? But they're just robots!

Damn, that's some pretty impressive AI they've got installed there.

But getting closer to me isn't gonna make them any more of a threat.

I'd estimate their speed stats to be no higher than five thousand or so.

With that kinda speed, they might as well be standing still as far as I'm concerned.

And their defense is low enough that just a teensy little hit from my dark conjurings would blow them to bits.

If I take 'em down before they get any closer, that's the end of that.

But since I went to all the trouble, I might as well try out a different strategy to counterattack them here.

Come on out, battle clones!

Several battle clones from my spider squad pop out between me and the robots.

Well, now's as good a time as any to explain the specs of the battle clones.

They're right around the size I was before I became an arachne, and the same shape, too.

As for their battle power, I'd say their equivalent stats would probably be around ten thousand on average.

Like me, they actually exist outside the scope of the system, so there's no way to Appraise them and find out for sure.

Also, that's just an estimation of their base stats. Depending on the circumstances, I can provide them with some of my own power to beef

them up, which means there's no real point trying to guesstimate their stats anyway.

Their main attack methods are evil eyes, dark conjurings, spatial conjurings, thread, scythes, and poison.

Frankly, aside from my being human-shaped instead of spider-shaped, there's not much difference from fighting the real me.

Obviously I've got more firepower, but they're fully loaded with high combat capabilities.

I call them "battle clones" for a reason, y'know.

The battle clones shoot thread at the robot charging toward me.

The thread wraps around its legs, and sticks to the ground as well.

The robot topples to the ground, legs completely bound.

And my battle clones don't waste a second before they swing their scythes, slicing the robot into pieces.

Mm-hmm.

Not bad, if I do say so myself!

Looks like they can wipe out robots with thread and scythes alone.

Because of the nature of their specs, the battle clones' direct attacks with their thread and scythes aren't particularly powerful.

Those are really just sub-weapons.

Their main weapons? That'd be evil eyes and conjurings.

So let's wrap things up with those!

The battle clones fire a volley of black bullets.

They pierce right through the rest of the robots, blowing them to bits.

Bwah-ha-ha-ha! Behold! My army is invincible!

Huh? If it was going to be this easy, I should've just done that in the first place!

I mean, yeah, but isn't it better to be sure they can fight with just their thread and scythes, just in case?

Verification is important, if you ask me.

Huh? Pride?

...Come on, it's like what that one swordsman said:

"This isn't pride, it's confidence!"

So allow me to show you why I'm so confident now!

Battle clones! Full-power operation!

I temporarily stop the information-gathering clones that are off spying

and such in other areas.

The information that usually feeds into my mind nonstop from thousands of spy clones all over the world temporarily cuts off.

In exchange, I can focus on using the battle clones to their full potential.

There are around ten thousand battle clones in total that I summoned to exterminate the elves.

While I was running the information-gathering clones at the same time, I could only give them basic commands, but what happens when I can focus my full attention on their performance?

I know the number of robots caught me by surprise, but I've got big numbers on my side too, you know!

Now let's wipe the floor with them!

All over the elf village, fights break out between battle clones and robots.

But the battle clones are a whole lot stronger than the robots.

The robots might have the advantage of numbers, but while they're scattered all over the elf village, the battle clones are concentrated around the residential district.

I'm not going to end up getting backed into a corner on my own, at least.

We can just exterminate the robots—beginning with the residential area—and then expand our circle of conquest outward from there.

So, we start advancing, destroying robots along the way.

There are robots out near the imperial and demon armies now, too, so I'm going to head that way to back them up.

Neither army has made contact with the robots yet. I should still be able to get there in time.

I'm sure Vampy and Mr. Oni would be fine, but Mera would have a hard time taking on more than one or two robots by himself.

What, the taratect troop?

You really think they'd need my help when they have a queen?

The queen's breath attack could raze a whole row of robots to the ground, y'know?

Seriously, queens are way too strong...

So yeah, I think I can trust the queen to take care of that area.

Thanks to my battle clones turning the tide of battle back in our favor, the puppet spiders are going all-out again, too.

They're gleefully charging at robots, blocking bullets with swords and slashing them in half at the torso.

Right, I guess the four of them can take down a single robot without a problem.

Even one-on-one, the puppet spiders are stronger—I don't think they would lose.

They retreated because they were outnumbered, but now we've got that advantage, too.

Still, what a calculating bunch, only giving it their all when they know we're going to win...

As I roll my eyes at the puppet spiders, the ground in front of me suddenly opens up, and something new emerges from below.

What is it, more robots? Wait, that silhouette doesn't look right.

I mean, at first glance, it's not that different from a robot's silhouette.

But the size seems...wrong.

It's huge.

This must be the powered-up version of these robots!

Still, I feel like I've seen this particular robot somewhere before, for some reason...

But the one I saw was a lot messier, and busted up all over...

Then it hits me.

It was a few years ago, when we were still traveling toward the demon territory.

The time when a UFO, an ancient weapon that was hidden underground, suddenly reappeared!

With a final-boss robot inside!

This thing looks just like that one!

What did Potimas say when he saw it, again?

Something about a "Gloria."

Then I guess the final boss robot was made based on an adapted version of the blueprints for his "Gloria" or whatever.

Which means the one I'm looking at now is the properly made version of that.

So that's a little scary.

I remember what Potimas said at the time.

"The original could easily destroy even an upper-class dragon. Ah, I

mean the fakes, not the originals, of course.”

The only upper-class dragons I know are the ones like the wind dragon Hyuvan, who fought alongside us against the UFO. While Hyuvan wasn't as strong as Mother, the queen taratect, his stats were easily over ten thousand on average.

Hell, his speed was over thirty thousand.

That's higher than the puppet spiders.

And Potimas bragged that his original “Gloria” robot could easily destroy such a dragon.

That'll be tough for the puppet spiders.

Even my battle clones would probably need to face it in a group.

But still, it wouldn't be too hard to win.

...If there were only one, that is.

But based on the visual information I'm getting from my battle clones all over the vicinity, even more Glorias are popping up in other places, too.

Oh come on, you can mass-produce these things?! You gotta be kidding me!



THE LORD LEARNS A LESSON

“Listen up, kids! You better eat every last bite!”

The director’s voice echoed through the orphanage cafeteria.

Mealtime tended to be quite noisy, since the children were always talking and laughing, but her yell still rang out loud and clear.

“What’s this? There’s still food on your plate!”

“I’m on a diet.”

The director’s brow furrowed as she looked at the girl’s food.

By this time, most of us were entering our teens and approaching puberty.

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’re like a bony little chicken! You have to get fat before you can go on a diet!”

“Whaaat? But you’re fat and you still aren’t on a diet, Director.”

“Of course a little child like you can’t understand the appeal of my alluring body! If you don’t eat, your chest will never get any bigger!”

The girl in question glanced down at her chest, and I remember watching her reluctantly resume eating.

I was very jealous of her meal.

At the time, I could still only have a liquid diet.

My body required more nutrients than the average person’s.

The IV constantly attached to my arm helped compensate for that, but it still wasn’t enough; only with the addition of an easily digestible, highly nutritious liquid diet could I manage to make ends meet.

My body was weakened by the venom my organs constantly produced, preventing me from digesting anything else.

So I was envious of the other kids who could eat all the solid food they wanted.

But I never said that out loud.

Everyone in the orphanage had a handicap in one way or another.

The girl who claimed to be on a diet looked like a normal human, but she was undoubtedly a chimera, too.

She had apparently been given DNA from many different kinds of animals, which all had different effects on her body, though each individual effect was slight.

Still, even if each one of them was small, the overall effect was too large to ignore.

And there was no way to fundamentally cure our conditions, only to treat the symptoms.

Because we were born with these bodies.

The only way to truly fix us would be to literally remake us.

That was impossible with the level of medical technology at the time; I doubt even Potimas could have done it.

We had no choice but to deal with the bodies we'd been given until we died.

And there was no doubt that death would come for us sooner than it would for a normal human.

Not one of us ever thought that we would have the same lifespan as an ordinary person.

Perhaps that is why we each started vaguely thinking about the future.

When we reached puberty, we graduated from being innocent children and took our first steps toward adulthood.

That was when we first started thinking about what it would mean to be an adult.

And wondering if we would even live long enough for that to happen...

One day, Lady Sariel came back, dragging two battered-looking kids behind her.

Not again, I thought to myself, exasperated.

The children in question were two of the quickest to start fights out of all the kids in the orphanage.

Whenever they started fighting outside the orphanage, Lady Sariel always punished them and brought them back here by force.

She knew these were no ordinary squabbles between children.

As chimeras, the two of them were stronger than normal humans. If they punched an ordinary child with all their might, they could seriously injure or even kill them.

Which is why Lady Sariel always ran to collect them right away.

These two weren't the only ones who got into trouble.

The handful of kids who were able to leave the orphanage were always causing some kind of commotion, and Lady Sariel came to get them every time.

We weren't forbidden from leaving the orphanage, but there were only a few of us kids who could actually go outside.

In my case, it was because of my health.

For the others, it was their appearance.

The orphanage was in a remote area, but it wasn't completely uninhabited.

Technically, the people who lived nearby had been informed of the orphanage's unique nature.

But that didn't mean they would unconditionally accept the chimeras, whose appearance immediately distinguished them from normal humans.

Children who were around the same age were all the more merciless.

This is all secondhand, since I was never able to leave the orphanage myself, but I heard that some kids really did have rocks thrown at them.

I remember being shocked that such a clichéd scene could actually happen in real life.

But even if it sounded like a fairy tale, this was our reality.

It was clear what the other people who lived near the orphanage thought of us, even if they didn't all throw rocks like some of the children did.

To them, our existence was a nuisance.

And when they already shunned us like that, any trouble we caused would give them an even worse impression of us.

That's why Lady Sariel always went out to retrieve the kids before that happened.

But obviously, it didn't feel good for us to be disliked, either.

The two kids that Lady Sariel often brought back were short-tempered and quick to fight on the basis of "an eye for an eye!"

Since the neighboring kids lashed out at them, they lashed out right

back.

That's just how those two were.

Fortunately, thanks to Lady Sariel, the two of them never actually managed to get in a full-on fight with the kids who lived nearby.

But that doesn't mean they never tried.

In truth, they did raise their hands to strike, but were stopped by Lady Sariel before they could follow through.

If their hands actually made contact, I doubt those kids would have escaped unscathed.

And then it would be impossible to repair the relationship between the orphanage and its neighbors.

Even without that happening, the fact that they tried to start a fight still remained, forming a gulf between us.

The gulf became a sense of loathing that showed in the locals' attitudes, and the orphanage kids resented that and caused more problems.

This vicious cycle was already well underway by the day of these events.

So we were all the more reluctant to leave the orphanage.

But there were still the active types who refused to be penned up and continued to go outside, and the problem children who brazenly ignored the concerns.

"Let go!"

One of those problem children was thrashing around to escape Lady Sariel's grasp.

Sariel obeyed his request and released him.

"Geh?!"

What happened when she let go while holding him in midair?

Obviously, gravity sent him crashing to the floor.

The unfortunate child hit the ground face-first and crouched down, clutching his nose.

"Why'd you let go?!"

"That is a highly irrational complaint."

Lady Sariel coolly brushed off his response.

To some people, that might seem like an attempt at provocation, but we'd known Lady Sariel long enough to learn that this was her default mode.

She was a very peculiar person, to say the least.

Her expression rarely changed.

Since she always looked indifferent, it was easy to assume she was cool and collected, but it didn't take long to realize that wasn't the case.

In a word, Lady Sariel was a weirdo.

She was a little bit off from other people, in various ways.

At times she seemed to have deep knowledge that none of us had, yet other times she didn't understand things we didn't even have to think about.

Her behavior was very irregular.

This instance was no exception: She released someone when she was told "let go!", then when the boy smacked his nose as a result and asked "why'd you let go?!", she claimed he was being "irrational."

I don't think Lady Sariel was trying to make fun of the boy in that exchange.

She wasn't annoyed, either; I think she just observed impartially that the boy was contradicting himself and decided to inform him that it was irrational.

Of course, this is all just speculation on my part. Unfortunately, it was impossible to tell what Lady Sariel was really thinking.

Her behavior was so astoundingly far removed from our idea of common sense that even we couldn't completely understand her.

In terms of knowledge, she was so wise and well-informed that it seemed like there was nothing she didn't know; when we were young and asked "why?" about everything, she answered each question without a moment's hesitation.

But when it came to people's emotions or ways of thinking, she suddenly seemed clueless.

It was as if she understood the range of human emotion in theory, but couldn't put her understanding to practical use...

In fact, when I learned that she was an angel and not a human, it made perfect sense.

All the more so when Gülie told me about the nature of angels later on.

Humans and angels seem to have fundamentally different thought processes.

From what he told me, angels are faithful to the mission they've been given, and they never waste time thinking about anything else more than

necessary.

However, Lady Sariel was not an ordinary angel, but a “lost angel,” an unusual position that was likely why she became so close with humans.

“Dammit! Next time I see those kids, I’m gonna punch ’em in the face!”

“Violence is not the answer.”

The boy punched the floor with his free hand, still clutching his nose with the other.

“Violence is a crime. Assault and battery.”

“Shut up! Besides, they’re the ones who started it!”

“Even so. It is wrong.”

Lady Sariel knew every law of every nation.

Since the mind of an angel works so differently from that of a human, I don’t know how much she truly understood us in the end.

But I think she learned by studying laws that humans loathed violence.

“Those jerks...”

The other boy she’d captured, who had been silent all this time, finally spoke.

“They were making fun of us. Of the orphanage, of Lady Sariel...”

He bit his lip in frustration.

I understood how he felt.

We were a family, an irreplaceable one.

How could anyone stay silent if someone spoke ill of their family?

“Even then, violence is not the answer.”

“Why not?!”

“Because that is what the law has decided.”

Lady Sariel’s response was brief.

Since the law said it was forbidden, it must not be done.

“So you’re saying the law is always right?!”

“No.”

This response seemed to negate her previous statement.

She wasn’t saying that we had to obey the law because it was correct?

“Then why do we gotta follow it?!”

“Because if you do not, you will be judged accordingly.”

“And that’s a good enough reason not to break it?!”

“Yes.”

Lady Sariel wasn’t talking about good or evil.

She was simply teaching us that if we resorted to violence, we would be arrested, whether the violence was just or not.

“If they attack you with words, you should argue with words of your own, not actions.”

That was logical enough.

But the local kids were discriminating against us just because we were chimeras.

They used the circumstances of our birth, which we couldn't possibly change, as fodder to insult us.

Even if we wanted to argue against them, they were already convinced that we were inferior.

Logic wouldn't work on that kind of people.

“How are we supposed to do that...?”

The boys were even more aware of that than I was, since I'd never actually interacted with the local kids myself.

They weren't willing to listen to anything we had to say.

But we couldn't use violence, either.

There was no way out.

“Think on it.”

That was Lady Sariel's only response.

“What is the best approach? What is the worst? You should always be thinking about these things. That is how people grow.”

...I don't know if just thinking about it could possibly solve this problem.

Lady Sariel's words were good ones, but I'm not sure if they were entirely suited to the occasion.

There really was something strange about Lady Sariel.

But we could all tell that she was trying to give us advice because she cared about us.

That sentiment alone was what saved us.

ARIEL

Originally a nameless victim of Potimas's human experimentation. Sarel named her by way of a misunderstanding, and she has gone by that name ever since. She was born with the DNA of various creatures, including dragons. The spider DNA had a particularly strong effect. Her body produced venom, yet was also hurt by it. As such, she was very frail and constantly confined to a wheelchair. She lived in an orphanage for chimeras established by Sarel's organization. Expecting that she wouldn't live for long, she made handkerchiefs to give to all of her fellow children at the orphanage. But...in a twist of cruel irony, she was the only one who survived.







RUMINATE: VAMPIRES

My relationship with Foduey continued in spite of that confrontational first meeting.

Since he made a fool of me, I was determined to make him eat those words.

So I studied up on humanity, and periodically went to show off the results to him.

This continued for a while, regardless of the fact that my original goal had been to speak to Sarii.

I went to see a woman, was chased off by an old man, and ended up having clandestine meetings with the man instead.

When I put it that way, it's quite a ridiculous thing, isn't it?

...Let's not dig any deeper into that line of thought.

Whenever Foduey and I met up, we spent most of our time on one thing: games.

The world the reincarnations came from had games such as shogi, correct?

Well, this world had something similar.

Shun taught the rules of shogi to Julius, who taught it to me as Hyrin, and made me play with him until I resented losing.

The concept of being able to use pieces one had stolen was quite novel.

In our shogi-esque game, pieces that had been taken were eliminated from the board completely.

In exchange, there were more pieces than in shogi, and the board was larger.

That made things more complicated, such that even a single match took a long time.

So a simplified version with less pieces and a smaller board was more

popular with the general public.

The only people who played the full version were pros and experts.

Foduey happened to be the latter.

Being the man known as the “Demon Lord of the business world,” he excelled at controlling the board just as he did in business.

He likely could have held his own even against a professional player.

Heh. He never defeated me once, though.

But human and dragon minds calculate things very differently.

It’s only logical that I would surpass him at such a game.

Immature?

...Perhaps a little bit.

But considering our first meeting, is it so wrong that I would want to have a taste of revenge against him?

At any rate, on one such day, Foduey and I were playing yet again.

“Hmmm...”

Once I made my move, Foduey groaned and stopped moving for a while.

He glared at the board for a while longer, but finally he gave a long sigh and sank back into his chair.

“I resign.”

It was the correct decision.

He had no chance of turning things around, no matter how he struggled.

“Good gracious. I thought myself a decent player. But being decimated this thoroughly is actually rather refreshing in a way.”

Those words appeared to be genuine, not just an effort to hide his frustration. He wore an amused grin despite the fact that he had lost.

Foduey reached out to move the pieces back to their starting positions.

“You want to keep going?”

As Foduey cheerfully attempted to continue to the next battle, I grew somewhat irritated.

Each round of this game took a considerable amount of time, as I said before.

It was mildly bewildering to me that Foduey still wanted to keep playing.

“Come now, you have more time than you could ever need. Surely you can humor an old man with precious little time left for a while longer.”

It was true that as a dragon, I had no lifespan to worry about.

Even if each match took a relatively long time, it still passed by in the blink of an eye compared to the eternity a dragon could live.

There would be no wasted time to speak of if I played with him a little longer.

“Precious little time, hmm?” I muttered pointedly.

Foduey and I were playing at a table in a large room.

For someone of Foduey’s wealth, however, the size of the room seemed rather modest.

It was only furnished to the bare minimum, with no showy décor whatsoever.

I suppose you could call that minimalism, but it seemed a strange lifestyle for someone like Foduey, whose total assets were an order of magnitude higher than that of most people.

Strangest of all, there wasn’t a single window in the entire room, and the lighting was quite dim.

“...Good point. I suppose we don’t know if that’s still the case anymore.”

Foduey gave a smile that was more of a grimace, revealing pointed canines at the edges of his mouth.

“Dear me... I thought I’d already had more ups and downs in life than the average person. Who would have thought that something like this would happen so near to the end?”

“True. I doubt even the most knowledgeable minds could have predicted such an outcome.”

Even I, a dragon, never thought that this would happen.

To borrow an idiom from the reincarnations, it was what one might call “a bolt from the blue.”

In terms of our game, it was as if someone had come over and flipped the entire board.

That is how unimaginable what happened to Foduey really was.

I can only tell what happened secondhand.

After all, I did not spend my every waking hour observing the human world.

I know only what Foduey himself told me, as I was not there myself.

At the time, the Sariella Foundation was secretly working to expose a criminal organization.

In fact, it was a combination of several different groups.

However, there was no obvious connection between them, and none of the groups even knew what others they were working with.

This made it very difficult to investigate, and time-consuming.

The Sariella Foundation realized this and decided to use somewhat forceful means that ignored customary practices, attempting to infiltrate the groups.

I do not believe they were wrong to do so. If they left the organization to its own devices, there would more than likely have been even more victims.

Even then, unfortunately enough, they were already too late.

That criminal organization had been made for the sole purpose of carrying out a certain man's machinations.

As you may have already guessed, that man was none other than Potimas.

He was sowing the seeds of his influence in criminal organizations all over the world, slowly taking over—all without ever showing himself.

His caution was so excessive that most of the organizations weren't even aware that they were connected to Potimas at all.

But no amount of caution can keep such activities secret forever.

Potimas overreached himself.

In the end, it was the orphans who helped the Sariella Foundation find Potimas.

The Foundation managed and supported orphanages all over the world, and in the course of these activities, they discovered something strange.

There was an increasing number of orphaned children disappearing.

Generally, children left the orphanage if they were adopted by a foster family, reached a certain age, and so on.

But more and more, they found they could no longer locate the children afterward.

Of course, even the Sariella Foundation couldn't keep track of every single child who moved on from the orphanage, but they had certain systems in place to ensure that the children didn't fall upon hard times after leaving.

In most cases, they found jobs through employment agencies affiliated with the Sariella Foundation and made a living that way.

But at some point, the number of orphans using that employment agency started to decrease.

It was a minor enough change that most people would pay it no mind, but Sariel noticed something was amiss and ordered an investigation.

As a result, they discovered that some of the orphans had gone missing entirely, and behind it was an organization under Potimas's control.

The kidnapped orphans were being subjected to Potimas's human experiments.

While the chimeras at Sariel's orphanage were the result of experiments meant to produce chimeras from birth, these stolen orphans were being subjected to experiments to turn them into chimeras after the fact.

Unfortunately, this proved to be more difficult than creating chimeras from birth, and most of these kidnapped children could not be saved.

The only survivors were those who were rescued before being experimented on.

Because of all this, there was no time to gather proof and expose each organization. Instead, the Sariella Foundation used all of its power to attack these groups.

I am told that all the major nations chose to avert their eyes from this rather violent tactic, presumably with some motivation by Foduey.

Since the Sariella Foundation was rooting out evil in their respective lands, I assume it was mutually beneficial.

Though I don't know about the nations that were colluding with those criminal organizations.

Lip service isn't enough to keep a nation running. Sometimes it takes unconventional measures, even if that includes criminals.

I suppose humans would call it a necessary evil.

Some of the nations probably just took advantage of both sides, but that is not relevant now.

I am sure many politicians proved their mettle by filling in the gaps left once the criminal organizations were all eliminated.

If Foduey had been healthy, I'm sure he would have intervened and collected even more money than he spent, but unfortunately that was not the case.

As I said, the Sariella Foundation utilized some forceful strategies to root out these organizations.

Those strategies included the direct use of military power.

The Sariella Foundation sometimes sent doctors and such into conflicted territories.

They needed soldiers to protect those doctors, which meant they had their own army, technically a private security firm.

Even a group like the Sariella Foundation had to dirty its hands at times.

That was what the security firm was for.

It goes without saying that this force played a part in taking out the criminal organizations as well.

Now, I will say in advance that the force was not at fault for what happened.

Even Foduey himself said so, and after hearing the full story, I was inclined to agree.

No one was at fault here—it was just incredibly bad luck.

...No, I suppose there was one person at fault: Potimas, of course.

Potimas's experiments covered a wide range, including attempts to turn subjects into vampires.

Nowadays, the word *vampire* likely calls Sophia to mind, but before she appeared, vampires had not existed for a very long time.

Truth be told, they were exterminated.

But we can discuss that particular history another time.

You see, vampires still did not exist even at the time when Foduey was alive.

To a reincarnation, it might make sense for a world in which dragons exist to have vampires as well, but in fact it is the opposite.

There were no vampires *because* there are dragons.

Even more so because of Sariella, I suppose.

Vampires really do exist conceptually, just like dragons and angels.

Did you think Sophia's abilities were due to her skill?

No, she is a proper vampire.

She was simply given relevant skills after being born as a vampire.

Although, of course, the fact that she was born a vampire was undoubtedly due to D's meddling.

Vampires are a sort of conjured race, an acquired species made by the

power of conjuring.

As such, anyone can be made into a vampire as long as the requisite conjuring is performed.

But think about it, hmm?

A species that can create more of itself just by biting people and drinking their blood is bound to destroy the ecosystem.

Vampirism is essentially a disease.

If it spreads, there is no stopping it.

That is why dragons decided to exterminate vampires whenever possible, and why they also run counter to Sariel's mission of protecting the native species.

Vampires are akin to an invasive species. They had to be eliminated.

Thus, vampires only existed in stories, even in this world.

Do you find it strange that tales of them survive, even if only in legend?

Irritatingly enough, knowledge of such significant beings spreads no matter what.

There is a theory that people unconsciously sense the existence of such creatures from far away, and reflect it in stories that spread throughout society.

There were tales of dragons and angels even in the reincarnations' world, were there not?

So, are the creatures in that story truly the stuff of fiction, or something more?

Stories are powerful things.

Even we dragons and Sariel could not control their propagation.

Most humans knew of vampires only as fictional creatures.

Yet somehow, Potimas managed to independently develop a conjuring for creating vampires.

Though I am loath to admit it, the man is undoubtedly a genius.

But even he could not create completely flawless runes from scratch.

Though his vampire conjuring was completed, it was technically a failure.

Those who were turned into vampires would lose their minds, attacking any living thing they saw, and eventually becoming beasts who lived only to drink blood.

Potimas locked away these failed vampires in one of his organizations.

They were sealed in the forms of the kidnapped orphans, who sadly were the victims of this experiment.

Not long after, the Sariella Foundation's security forces were sent out to save them.

They brought down the organization and rescued the victims.

Unfortunately, said victims had gone mad due to the effects of the experiments, and even tried to attack the force, but were successfully brought into custody.

At this point, I imagine you have some idea of what happened to that force, correct?

Yes, that's right.

The victims, the failed vampires, bit several of the people in the security force.

I doubt I need to elaborate on the results, but those who were bitten turned into vampires.

And, like the victims of the experiments, they lost their minds, too.

Worse yet, there was a delay between when they were bitten and when they transformed into vampires.

In the case of true vampires, the transformation is complete the moment the vampire bites the victim and drinks their blood with the intent to turn them.

But that wasn't so for the failed vampires.

The length of time varied between individuals, but some of them continued acting normal for up to several days, or so I am told.

Then their condition would suddenly worsen, they would grow disoriented, and within moments they lost all sanity.

Thus, the security force members who were bitten transformed into more failed vampires.

One of these members was the reason Foduey was turned into a vampire as well.

Evidently, he was the captain of the force.

He was reporting to Foduey about the attack on the organization, his findings from the location, and so on.

In a terrible twist of fate, that happened to be the moment when he transformed into a vampire.

Thus, the person he then attacked and bit was Foduey.

...I did not know this captain, as we never met.

But according to Foduey, when he was giving the report, he expressed sympathy for the victims who were transfigured, and righteous anger at the perpetrators.

Given how much Foduey trusted him, he must have been a good man.

Which is apparently why no one who knew him believed that he would suddenly attack Foduey like that.

That man's unexpectedly violent act, and the fact that the all-important Foduey was attacked, led to a swift and thorough investigation into the frightening phenomenon of vampire transformation.

There were the original victims of the human experiments, then the second-wave victims, the force members who were bitten by the original victims.

And then, there were the third-wave victims who were bitten by those force members.

All were quickly quarantined.

It was a highly dangerous situation. If they had acted even a little less quickly, a vampirism pandemic might have spread through the entire world in a flash.

I hate to put it this way, but you could say that Foduey's sacrifice kept the number of victims to a minimum.

In fact, all things considered, it is nothing short of miraculous that the damage was so small.

And there was one other miracle, too.

Namely, Foduey's mind.

The victims lost their sanity, but Foduey was an exception.

When Foduey was bitten, the blood loss put his already elderly body on the verge of death.

He fell into a coma for a time, but eventually awoke.

Since he had already developed the fangs that signified a vampire transformation, it was assumed he would not be sane even if he did wake up, so he was restrained in the bed.

When he awoke, he struggled against the bonds immediately, and shouted angrily at the doctor who came running over, demanding to be released.

That was how the doctor discovered that Foduey had retained a sound

mind.

It's unclear why Foduey was able to stay sane.

Even I do not know everything.

Sometimes, things happen in life that defy all expectations.

Foduey is one example, Potimas another.

Although in my estimation, Foduey's stubbornness and spite must have won out over the vampiric curse.

Still, it didn't change the fact that he was turned into a vampire, even if he stayed sane.

And there was no telling whether he might someday lose his mind like the other victims.

Thus, Foduey was kept in isolation.

I was visiting him in his isolation ward.

"Hrm."

Foduey grumbled again.

Now that he was being kept in isolation, he had lots of time on his hands.

So I periodically visited and played games with him.

Even if he was being kept in isolation, there was no way to prevent a dragon like me from visiting a human.

The supervisor of the isolation facility was reluctant, but he did not stop my visits.

"No take-backs, understood?"

"Heavens, of course not. There are few situations in life that allow for take-backs. That is precisely why humans are so afraid of making mistakes."

Sure enough, I do not remember a single instance of Foduey attempting to take back a move.

"But humans still make mistakes. It happens, no matter how hard we try. We accumulate these mistakes, write rules in an effort to avoid making new ones, and try to reduce the number of mistakes we make as we go. Human history is a chronicle of mistakes. And we learn from those mistakes to shape the future. Not that the mistakes ever stop completely."

Foduey moved a piece as he spoke.

I moved my piece right away, so that it was Foduey's turn again.

But he was deep in thought and made no further moves for a while.

"And I have not lost all these many times in vain. Each time I am defeated, each time I fail, I take it as another lesson. And now I will put all those lessons to use in this one move!"

Foduey made a dramatic declaration as he moved another piece.

At that, I promptly moved one of my own pieces to block his move.

An awkward silence settled over us for a moment.

"...No matter how much one tries to eliminate mistakes, there is no guarantee that it will lead to victory. This is a perfect example of that."

"Very smooth."

Foduey was nothing if not loquacious.

From meaningless chatter to groan-inducing metaphors, he was always talking throughout every game.

"They do say that language is humanity's greatest invention. Human history is also a long record of arguing in circles."

"No, that doesn't make sense."

It was frequently difficult to tell whether he was being serious about topics like this, which led to no small amount of bewilderment on my part.

"But of course it makes sense. Because of the existence of dragons and their absolute power, we humans could never depend on military might alone. In the end, words are our greatest weapons, but it took countless arguments to hone them to this level. Twisting the truth, talking the enemy over to one's own side... It is because we have done these things for so long that our tongues became so sharp."

"Don't blame your own nastiness on history. Nor do I appreciate you casually blaming us dragons, for that matter."

Foduey definitely had a natural talent for sophism.

...Not exactly an ideal trait.

"Honestly. Your endless rambling never ceases to amaze."

"Yes, I daresay there are few who could best me at it."

Foduey acted as if my sarcasm were a compliment, even having the nerve to look smug as he moved his piece.

Of course, I made my own move immediately to wipe the smirk off his face.

"I can certainly best you at this game, but not at talking," I muttered.

“I should think not. Humans and dragons really do think at different speeds. No matter how many times I challenge you, I doubt I can ever win against you at this game. It’s a strange thing, isn’t it? They both lie in the realm of the mind, but while I can never beat you in a game, I suspect I would never lose to you in an argument. Perhaps it means that dragons are superior in overall calculation ability, but humans are better at being shrewd and crafty?”

Foduey glowered at the board, but still looked somewhat pleased.

“There is no doubt that dragons are magnificent, of course. But no matter how great they might be, that doesn’t mean there aren’t any aspects in which they fall short of other creatures. Dragons are not as cunning as humans. They don’t have to be because they’re strong enough without it. Instead of resorting to any cowardly means necessary like humans so often do, dragons can generally seize victory just by facing the enemy head-on. So there was never a need for you to be shrewd. But you see, that is negligence on the part of dragons. Because you write off humans as lesser beings, our craftiness confounds you. Just as I have currently smooth-talked you, a dragon, into fighting me on human terms.”

Foduey looked even more delighted now.

Despite our battle being on the board, Foduey’s words did indeed fill me with a helpless sense of defeat.

It felt as if I had played right into the hands of the man in front of me, who, from a dragon’s perspective, was only a frail old man unworthy of note.

And indeed, from a neutral perspective, that really was the case.

I, a dragon, was being thoroughly manipulated by a human, a lesser being.

Well, I suppose by that point he was a vampire and not a human, but that is a trivial matter.

“Humans are cowardly, and far more foolish than dragons realize. We have made mistakes throughout history, and supposedly learned from those mistakes, yet we continue to make more. Mistakes upon mistakes upon mistakes. What’s worse, each time we make a mistake we become craftier, and so the amount of damage done by each mistake only grows. Even though these lessons are meant to reduce the damage. Isn’t that strange?”

Despite feeling like I was playing into his hands, I continued to face

Foduey from a human perspective, because I knew this was a sort of test.

A trial to see if I could face Sariel.

“You are a dragon, yet you have learned the perspective of humans. I doubt that means you have come to fully understand humans, of course. As I said before, humans are far more foolish than dragons believe. Lady Sariel has been facing that foolishness all this time.”

Foduey moved his piece.

This time, I moved my own almost before Foduey’s hand had even left his.

“I resign.”

Foduey admitted defeat with a sunny expression.

“You possess the perspective of both god and mankind. Perhaps, then, you can bring about change in Lady Sariel. It is no longer within the realm of human possibility, but a god should not do it, either. It must be someone who is a god of sorts, yet understands humans as well.”

This was a serious piece of advice from the defeated to the victor.

And then, a request.

“You see the sorry state I am in. I doubt I will ever leave this room again. So I will entrust this task to you.”

Now that he had been turned into a vampire and isolated, there was little Foduey could do on his own.

He could still offer monetary support within reason, but nothing more.

There was a limit to how much he could work for Sariel’s sake as he once did.

“Please, take care of Lady Sariel.”

Foduey bowed his head in supplication, but I said nothing.

Was there anything I could do for Sariel?

A part of me did not know how to answer that question.

And so, I couldn’t bring myself to agree so easily.

...My concerns, I’m afraid, were right on the mark.

In the end, I was never able to live up to Foduey’s expectations.



Interlude

POTIMAS AND VAMPIRES

Vampires...

What a failure.

I gained knowledge about conjuring and attempted to develop a technique to make humans evolve, but the result was far from satisfactory.

The reason I did not dispose of the failed vampires was so that I could use them for further experiments, but the Sariella Foundation just had to interfere and take them away.

Well, they would not have been much use anyway, I suppose.

Let us simply say that I was spared the trouble of destroying them.

However, it is quite intriguing that the failed vampires then increased their number, and just a single person managed to become a proper vampire.

I should like to investigate the workings of his body for myself, but I doubt I will be able to acquire him for experiments.

Besides, a species with so many weaknesses is a far cry from the eternal life I desire.

Even if I could obtain that specimen, I am sure my experiments would destroy him before long.

So in that way, perhaps it is not such a huge loss.



5 SHOWDOWN: SPIDER VS MEGA-ROBOT

Okay, what the hell?!

Here I was, busting robots left and right, thinking this was gonna be a piece of cake.

But it turns out the robots I was beating were actually the mass-produced-trash tier, and now I gotta deal with these giant “Gloria” mega-robot things.

On top of that, those are mass-produced, too...

And we don’t know yet how strong these mega-robots are.

If what Potimas said that one time is true, then they’re even stronger than a top-tier dragon.

And there’s a ton of them...

Yeah, this doesn’t look so good, does it...?

I don’t think I can mess around with trying to “conserve my strength” anymore.

Originally, I was hoping to avoid losing too many clones in this battle so I could save ’em for later in the war, but it looks like this isn’t the time to worry about that anymore.

I use my Panoptic Vision to do a quick estimate of the mega-robots’ numbers.

Dude, there’s almost a thousand of them!

At least that’s less than the regular robots.

But the idea of that many robots that are stronger than dragons is still terrifying.

This also applies to the puppet spiders, but if a group with stats averaging over ten thousand really wanted to, they could easily take down a whole nation.

The likes of humans and demons, whose stats are usually under a

thousand, wouldn't be able to put up a fight.

Maybe if several of those rare individuals whose stats are over a thousand were to work together, they might stand a chance of stopping a monster like that, and possibly lose their lives in the process.

Unless you're a special case like a hero, it's a mistake to even try fighting them.

That's the kind of threat we're talking about here.

And even among that level of monsters, greater dragons are particularly powerful.

Now, supposedly, these mega-robots can beat a greater dragon.

And there's over a thousand of them?!

Seriously, a force like this could take on the entire world and win...

The only people who could stop something like that are probably the Demon Lord and Güli-güli...

Uh, Mr. Potty? You trying to destroy the world or what?

...Actually, I guess it is Potimas's fault that this world was nearly wiped out in the first place.

Is he a god of destruction or something?

...I'm starting to feel like that might be kinda accurate.

Okay, enough getting distracted with stupid thoughts. I need to do something about the mega-robot vanguard of said god of destruction, stat.

I mean, okay, let's calm down.

Potimas is the one who claimed they're stronger than greater dragons, right?

So it's totally possible that he might just be exaggerating and they're not actually that bad, riiiiight?

The mega-robot in front of me moves.

In spite of its huge size, it only takes an instant for it to close in on one of the puppet spiders—Riel—and slashes at her with its sword.

Riel just barely manages to dodge, bending over backward like she's going into bridge pose to narrowly avoid the blade.

...Why did she dodge it like *that*, though?

A moment later, the other three sisters all jump at the mega-robot that attacked Riel.

The puppet spiders have already busted out their six hidden arms, each equipped with weapons, slashing at the mega-robot!

The unpleasant sound of metal clashing against metal rings out.

Riel and the other three all jump back as if repelled.

...Riel is still scuttling around on her back for some reason, fleeing in a crab walk, but let's just ignore that.

As for the mega-robot? There's not a scratch on it!

So instead, the puppet spiders start firing magic.

It's the Black Spear spell I always used to use!

Pitch-black spears appear in midair and attack the mega-robot from all directions!

But then, they disappear right before they can hit the armor.

That must be the Anti-Technique Barrier that Potimas always uses, the one that cancels out conjurings.

It doesn't seem like the mega-robots can produce it over a wide range like Potimas, but instead it's probably coated over their armor somehow.

In other words, the only way to beat these things is to either crush them with a non-conjuring-related physical attack, or hit them with something so huge it busts through the barrier...

But cutting attacks from the puppet spiders, whose stats are in the ten thousands, aren't making a scratch, and their magic didn't work, so both physical and magic attacks are gonna be tough...

Basically, their defense is bad news.

So what about their attack power...?

The mega-robot aims some sort of firing system at the puppet spiders, as if to get payback.

The resulting laser beams easily pierce through the trees and even the ground itself.

Of course, the puppet spiders made themselves scarce before those beams could hit. But judging by the depth of the holes left in the ground, a direct hit would've done some serious damage even to the puppet spiders.

As Fiel dodges the laser, a blade comes sweeping down toward her.

These mega-robots can move from one attack to the next way too quickly.

They're far too fast, and too good at assessing the situation, for giant robots.

Or wait, I guess they're good at that *because* they're robots, huh?

The problem is that their mechanical bodies are somehow able to keep

up with their quick mental calculations.

If you converted that speed into stats, it'd easily be over ten thousand.

I can tell that much because Fiel can't even keep up.

In terms of timing, it would've been impossible for Fiel to dodge that slash on her own...

It slashes through the place where Fiel would've been just as I teleport her over to my side.

The blade hits the ground, but instead of breaking, it actually slashes right through the surface without slowing.

Okay, got it. Their attack power is super high, too.

Forget tough vegetables and sinewy meat—folks, this blade can slash right through the damn cutting board, too!

...So, these things are seriously strong enough to beat a greater dragon.

And there's seeeeriously over a thousand of theeem...?

I was being careful not to underestimate Potimas, but this is still a *liiiiittle* more intense than I was expecting, y'know?

...Okay, sorry, I lied.

I did underestimate him a tiny bit. I admit it...

But I mean, c'mon!

We've been beating the snot out of Potimas lately, dude!

Like that time when the former seventh battalion of the demon army rebelled. We didn't come out of that so hot, either, but I literally punched him in the face, remember?

And when he was sneaking around in the background of the last big battle, we got the jump on him and destroyed his plans, right?

See? Potimas hasn't had a single win lately!

How could I *not* underestimate him a little?

After all that, making a slight miscalculation like this was practically unavoidable.

AKA it's not my fault.

If anything, I guess this just proves the big talk Potimas is always strutting around with isn't just talk after all.

The reason he's been kinda pathetic lately is probably because he couldn't actually use his full strength for those encounters.

If he cut even one of these mega-robots loose, Güli-güli would definitely be on top of it.

I imagine Potimas is scared of Güli-güli and wants to avoid that at all costs.

Which also means he's *not* scared of anyone else.

He seriously intends to crush us this time around.

I'm sure he went into this fully confident that he's strong enough to win, too.

Thinking that there's no way he could lose, just like I keep saying.

I can see why he might think that, with all this firepower stashed away.

But that doesn't mean he can beat me.

I'll admit it: Potimas's forces are stronger than I expected.

But they're still not outside the range of what I can handle.

Maybe Potimas has absolute confidence, but so do I.

It's true that his forces were a little more than I bargained for, but only because my estimation was "I dunno, maybe this much?", and it was higher than that line, that's all.

The line in question was the midpoint between the best and worst scenario I could imagine.

Potimas has gone above and beyond that line, but he hasn't crossed the worst-case scenario.

I mean, the worst thing I can imagine is him having enough power to go toe-to-toe with Güli-güli.

I seriously doubt Potimas has surpassed that.

Knowing him, if he could do something like that, he would've done it by now.

He's only been relatively well-behaved all this time because of Güli-güli. If he had a way to get that thorn out of his side, there's no way he wouldn't jump at the chance.

Since he hasn't taken out Güli-güli yet, that means Potimas's strength is less than or equal to Güli-güli's.

I say possibly "equal to" because of Potimas's overcautious personality; I figure if his odds of winning were fifty-fifty, he'd probably be reluctant to try.

Güli-güli is definitely a thorn in Potimas's side, but he's still not the type

to risk putting himself in danger to challenge that thorn.

After all, defeating Güli-güli isn't Potimas's goal...

He's only got this much power to defend himself just in case—it's not his primary objective.

That's why I assumed it'd be on the lower side, but I guess he's even more of a coward than I thought.

He must be really scared of Güli-güli.

But if anything, that's why I'm confident I can beat Potimas.

Because I've prepared myself to fight anyone, even possibly Güli-güli himself.

Our big plan is to destroy the system.

When Güli-güli finds out about that, there's no guarantee he won't try to stop us personally.

If anything, I think there's a pretty good chance he will.

Which is why I've been studying diligently so that I could even defeat Güli-güli!

There's no way I'm gonna lose to some wimp who's been hiding from Güli-güli in the elf village instead!

Listen up, all you battle clones!

Forget about the regular robots!

Focus all your efforts on destroying those mega-robots!

There's about a thousand mega-robots.

Versus ten thousand battle clones.

We've got ten times their numbers.

But in terms of approximate stats, the battle clones are only a little over ten thousand on average, not much different from the puppet spiders.

Considering that all four puppet spiders together couldn't lay a finger on a single mega-robot, it doesn't seem like numbers alone will be enough to make up for the difference in strength.

Sadly, fighting power doesn't work like addition.

Having ten fighters with the equivalent of stats around ten thousand doesn't add up to winning against one opponent with stats around a hundred thousand.

Now, I'm guessing the mega-robots' strength would translate into stats of around twenty thousand.

Around the equivalent of a queen taratect, or maybe even a little weaker.

If the puppet spiders fought them fully prepared to die, they *might* be able to take one down with them.

Meaning that since the battle clones are about the same strength as the puppet spiders, they might be able to win if I'm willing to lose at least four of them to each mega-robot.

Not that I have any intention of making such a big sacrifice, of course.

It's true, the battle clones' physical strength would be around ten thousand if converted into stats.

But that's just their physical ability we're talking about.

The outcomes of battles in this world aren't determined solely by stats.

Back in the day, I wrestled victory away from opponents with much higher average stats than me thanks to the power of skills.

Now that I've been removed from the system, I can't use skills anymore, but I have conjurings that I've practiced and perfected to recreate those skills.

And that goes for the battle clones, too.

Frankly, their ten-thousand-stat physical strength is just a bonus.

I've never been a big fan of close combat, anyway.

My strength, and the strength of my battle clones, is using threads and poison from a moderate distance to weaken the enemy, or attacking with magic from a long distance.

Their physical prowess is only there to help them do just that!

Now, let me give you a little demonstration!

Battle clones! Use Dimension Cutter on the mega-robots!

Allow me to explain!

Dimension Cutter is a special finishing move that uses spatial conjuring to divide up the space that the enemy is occupying, creating an unblockable slashing attack!

Since it's separating the space itself, there's no way to defend against it with physical strength!

Unless the target takes some serious countermeasures, spatial conjuring can turn into an unstoppable killer move, just like that time a while back when I transported Mr. Oni way up into the air so he dropped to the ground.

Since it's so unfairly powerful, the Spatial Magic skill had limits on that kind of insta-kill strategy, but I'm not bound by those rules anymore!

In other words, I can use as many unfair insta-kill moves as I want!

Even the mega-robots won't come out unscathed against a move like th...

...ah.

The battle clones all used Dimension Cutter.

But they failed because of the anti-conjuring barrier coating the mega-robots' armor.

...O-okay, there's no need to panic just yet!

Play it cool... Play it cool...

Riiiiight.

I got a little ahead of myself and launched a volley of Dimension Cutters, but if you really think about it, of course that wouldn't work on the mega-robots.

Dimension Cutter is a conjuring that acts on space itself.

And the barrier around the mega-robots' armor prevents conjurings from activating within a certain range.

Yes, it's got a range!

In other words, in a certain space!

So, I used a conjuring on a space containing a barrier that blocks any conjurings from activating within that space.

Yep! And look how that turned out!

It didn't work at all!

Wow! What a terrible combination!

Hmmm.

That probably means that practically none of my other attack-based spatial conjurings are gonna work, either.

Without countermeasures, spatial conjurings can be an unstoppable, unfair attack.

The only problem is that if there *are* countermeasures, then they just won't work at all.

Separating space as with Dimension Cutter, crushing the entire space, or teleporting them someplace dangerous like I did to Mr. Oni... Noooooone of that is gonna fly with these things.

Since spatial conjurings work on space, all you have to do is make it so it can't be used on that space, and it'll block everything completely...

I doubt the mega-robots' barriers were made purely with spatial conjuring in mind, but they certainly make a perfect defense against it, I've

got to admit.

So what am I gonna do now...?

If I can't use spatial conjuring, the strongest and most unfair of all my ace-in-the-hole attacks, that puts a serious limit on my options here...

The simplest way to ignore the anti-technique barrier would be physical attacks, but as I keep saying, the battle clones' physical abilities would only be around ten thousand in terms of stats.

If the puppet spiders couldn't put a single scratch on that armor with the same kind of stats, I seriously doubt the battle clones could deal any serious damage just by charging at them.

Now, annihilation attacks would probably work if I was willing to allow a whole lot of honorable deaths, but...

Annihilation attacks are my equivalent of the Rot-attribute attacks.

Back when I had skills, they were a crazy self-injurious attack method that dealt a huge amount of damage in exchange for some serious recoil.

When I used Rot attacks, whole parts of my body would disappear.

But apparently, even that extreme recoil from the skill was getting off easy.

If one of my battle clones uses an annihilation attack, the whole clone disintegrates.

Basically, it's a full-on self-destruct attack.

In exchange, it's incredibly powerful, but using it requires the sacrifice of a clone.

Which means if I wanted to defeat all thousand or so mega-robots, I would have to lose the same number of clones to do the job.

That doesn't seem very cost-effective, though, does it?

The one exception is that my signature weapon, the giant scythe, can wield annihilation attacks without the resulting recoil damage. Going around destroying every single mega-robot by myself would take forever, though.

I guess using annihilation attacks from my clones will have to be a last-resort method if nothing else works.

For now, I'm rejecting the kamikaze clone strategy.

So, as far as conjuring is concerned, we've just ruled out my best kind.

How about my second-best specialty, dark magic?

I aim a random clone at a mega-robot and have it use a Black Spear-

style conjuring.

The spear hits the mega-robot's armor.

Some kind of reaction between the anti-technique barrier and the energy in the dark spear causes the mega-robot to stumble back a few steps.

Like the Dragon Barrier skill, the anti-technique barrier inhibits the use of conjurings, but there is a limit. If you overwhelm the barrier with more power than it can handle, you can deal damage accordingly, at least in theory...

But the mega-robot that took a direct hit with the Black Spear only has a slight dent in its armor.

...Well, that ain't gonna work.

That attack should've done waaay more damage...

I mean, at least it did *something*, but how many damn spears would it take to actually bring the thing down like that?

The sun would set by the time we were done.

No, even before that, I would lose too many battle clones.

Then it'll just turn into a mudslinging contest.

Hrmm. Looks like shooting them with conjurings won't be very effective, either...

So, that leaves thread and poison?

Poison...poison on a machine...

Yeah, I can't see that working very well.

And thread isn't really a main method of attack in the first place...

It's more like a trap for stopping the enemy from moving, a strategy that only really shines when you have other attack methods.

But none of those other attack methods are really gonna work here...

Wait, what?

Am I screwed?

...No, no, no!

Not yet!

I'm not giving up yet!

Okay, all jokes aside, I do still have a way to beat the mega-robots.

And I can guarantee that it will work, too.

Otherwise, I wouldn't go around bragging that I'm "never gonna lose to Potimas" with a big smirk on my face.

Still, I'd rather save that method for later if I can help it.

I don't really wanna unveil it yet.

So how can I defeat the mega-robots without using that...?

Hmmm. It feels like a bit of a waste, but I guess this is my best bet: the special bullets I prepared to use against Potimas.

Let's go with these.

I knew Potimas was going to use this anti-technique barrier again, so of course I had some countermeasures up my sleeve, too.

I wanted to save this to use against Potimas himself, but that doesn't matter now.

If I don't take down these mega-robots fast, Vampy and the others might get hurt.

So it's now or never, right?

So without any further ado: CONNECT!

I open up a path connecting me to the space-specialist clones.

As the name implies, these clones are designed for spatial conjuring.

Usually, I keep them in separate dimensions I've made.

And now, I have business with one of those separate dimensions, this one made and managed by the space-specialist clones.

I use my main body to take out something inside.

I've got to take careful aim so I don't miss.

These bullets are precious, after all!

It's such a pain in the ass to make them that I almost understand why Potimas is so reluctant to waste his, dammit!

Although these bullets aren't the same as the ones Potimas uses, so I'm not entirely sure which ones are more valuable.

Anyway, let's use one of these special bullets to destroy a mega-robot.

Ready, aiiiiim.....fire!

My bullet hits the mega-robot in front of me and pierces through the armor—smashes it, in fact.

Not only that, but the bullet goes right through the mega-robot and into the weaker robots marching directly behind it, one after another.

It also goes on to hit a second mega-robot that I wasn't even aiming at, pulverizes that one too, and finally flies off in the direction of next week.

...Um, yikes?!

I'm gonna have to be real careful about where I aim these things!

If any allies happened to be in the way, they could get seriously injured!

I mean, I already knew these things were pretty powerful, but isn't this an excess of firepower, to say the least?

Honestly, it might be straight-up overkill...

See, the truth is that these excessively powerful bullets are what you might call meteors.

Yep. Meteors.

Giant chunks that I dropped toward the surface of the planet from outer space.

Physically speaking, I made them out of legendary-class monsters.

You know, the ones I had Vampy and Mr. Oni and friends hunting to recover energy and level themselves up.

I picked some that seemed particularly durable and made them into bullets.

Frankly, I didn't even worry about how they looked, since it doesn't matter anyway. As long as they're sturdy, anything goes.

They also have to be able to withstand the overheating that occurs when they reenter the atmosphere, though. That ruined a couple contenders.

So, I take the bullets that meet those requirements, teleport them into space, and let them drop onto the planet.

As long as they're not so far out that they get caught in orbit, they'll fall of their own accord once they're teleported.

The problem is how to catch the bullets once they've fallen.

Otherwise, they'll just crash right into the ground.

So how do I catch them exactly? Well, I beat them to the spot where they're going to fall, and drop them into a separate dimension right before they land.

Specifically, an empty vacuum dimension that just goes in a straight line and loops around in a circle.

When I pop a meteor bullet into the loop dimension, it retains the speed it had when it went in, and just keeps zipping around indefinitely, since there's no air resistance in a vacuum.

And since it retains the same speed, that means it'll have the same destructive impact that it was going to crash into the planet with.

So when I take it back out of that dimension, it becomes a meteor attack that I can aim wherever I want.

One time, I hit Potimas with a giant rock that I dropped out of the sky.

But that didn't seem like quite enough impact, so I decided on a literal meteor instead.

There's a major delay if it's falling from the sky, though, and at that distance you have to do some serious calculations or you'll miss the mark.

And if the target moves from that spot before the thing hits, you can forget about the whole thing.

Especially since the delay gives 'em time to run away.

So, I came up with a solution to all those problems by way of popping the falling meteors into an alternate dimension for later.

Which was a great idea, if I do say so myself, except for the fact that it was pretty hard to pull off in practice.

Like I said, catching a fallen meteor isn't the easiest task.

Think about it this way: It's hard enough to run after and catch a ball that's been hit by a pro baseball player, right?

With meteors, you still have to get to the landing spot before they do, plus if you don't catch 'em, the whole area gets smashed up. It takes a lot of guts, is what I'm saying.

And I had to do it a bunch of times to save up more shots...

Although the hard work definitely pays off in the form of ridiculous power.

You can roughly calculate its force with the mgh formula, in fact.

m is mass.

g is acceleration due to gravity.

h is height.

If you multiply all those numbers together, you get the amount of potential energy contained in the object being pulled down by gravity.

This is high school physics stuff, y'know.

If you haven't memorized it all yet, now's your chance.

That being said, m probably gets reduced while it's burning up in the atmosphere, g must be different since this planet isn't Earth and is presumably a different size, and h won't be much help either since it started out in space beyond the range of gravity.

In other words, I can't actually give you an exact number!

So what was even the point, you ask?

...C'mon, I'm allowed to show off like a smarty-pants once in a while.

Huh? Don't try to show off with high school physics fundamentals?

Well, that's not my fault!

My memories only go up to high school!

Obviously that means my knowledge only goes up to what I learned in high school, so I just have to get by with that if I want to show off my smarts at all, duh!

Sure, maybe it's better if I don't try to act like a smarty-pants in the first place if that's the best I've got, but it's human nature to want to look cool from time to time.

What, now you're saying I'm not even human?

...Yeah, well. Touché.

Okay, I think that's a wrap on this "arguing with no one" bit.

Back to the meteor bullets I made to use on Potimas.

They're ridiculously strong, all right.

In fact, they're so strong they're almost a little *too* dangerous, but they can clearly destroy a mega-robot without a hitch.

I mean, yeah.

It's just raw physical power, nothing the anti-conjuring barrier can prevent.

Armor's not enough to stand up to that kind of impact, either.

Even I'll admit that it might be overkill, but hey, better safe than sorry.

I've been cranking out these meteor bullets as a pure physical attack to counteract Potimas's anti-technique barrier, saving them up whenever I got a chance.

In total, I think I have about ten thousand.

I know I looked at the number of mega-robots and accused Potimas of wanting to destroy the world or whatever, but I'm pretty sure I could do just that if I unleashed the rain of meteors I've got stashed up...

Not that I'm going to, obviously.

At any rate, I'm gonna have to use about a thousand of them now, so I guess I won't be able to destroy the world anymore anyway!

Alrighty, let's clean up the rest of these mega-robots, then!

Oh, and be careful about aim, obviously!

I have to make sure I don't kill one of my allies with a stray bullet or anything awful like that.

It was hella careless of me to fire one off without even thinking about it.

I'm lucky there happened to be a second mega-robot in its path and not

any of my allies.

But hey, now I know that I can kill at least two mega-robots with one bullet if I aim just right.

So I'll just have to take aim and take 'em out!

I only have so many bullets, after all. Gotta save as many as I can, if I can help it.

So, I start calculating paths that will hit at least two mega-robots and avoid any allies getting caught in the crossfire.

It's a piece of cake if I use Panoptic Vision to get a panoramic view.

Once I line up a few good shots, I immediately transport some battle clones into position and fire off the meteor bullets.

Several loud *BOOMS* echo around the area.

Woo-hoooo!

Dude! Did you see that?!

I took out five mega-robots with one shot!

Damn, that feels goooooood!

I could get hooked on a rush like this!

That one volley reduced the number of mega-robots quite a bit.

Pretty good start, considering I was able to take out up to five mega-robots at once.

Every single shot blasted at least two mega-robots, minimum.

The mega-robots are on the move, of course, but they're generally marching in the same direction.

Most of them are either headed toward the imperial and demon armies, or toward the queen's taratect troop.

Since I know what direction they're heading in, it's easy to target several at once.

On top of the meteor bullets being super destructive, they also move absurdly fast when fired, way too fast for even the mega-robots to dodge very well.

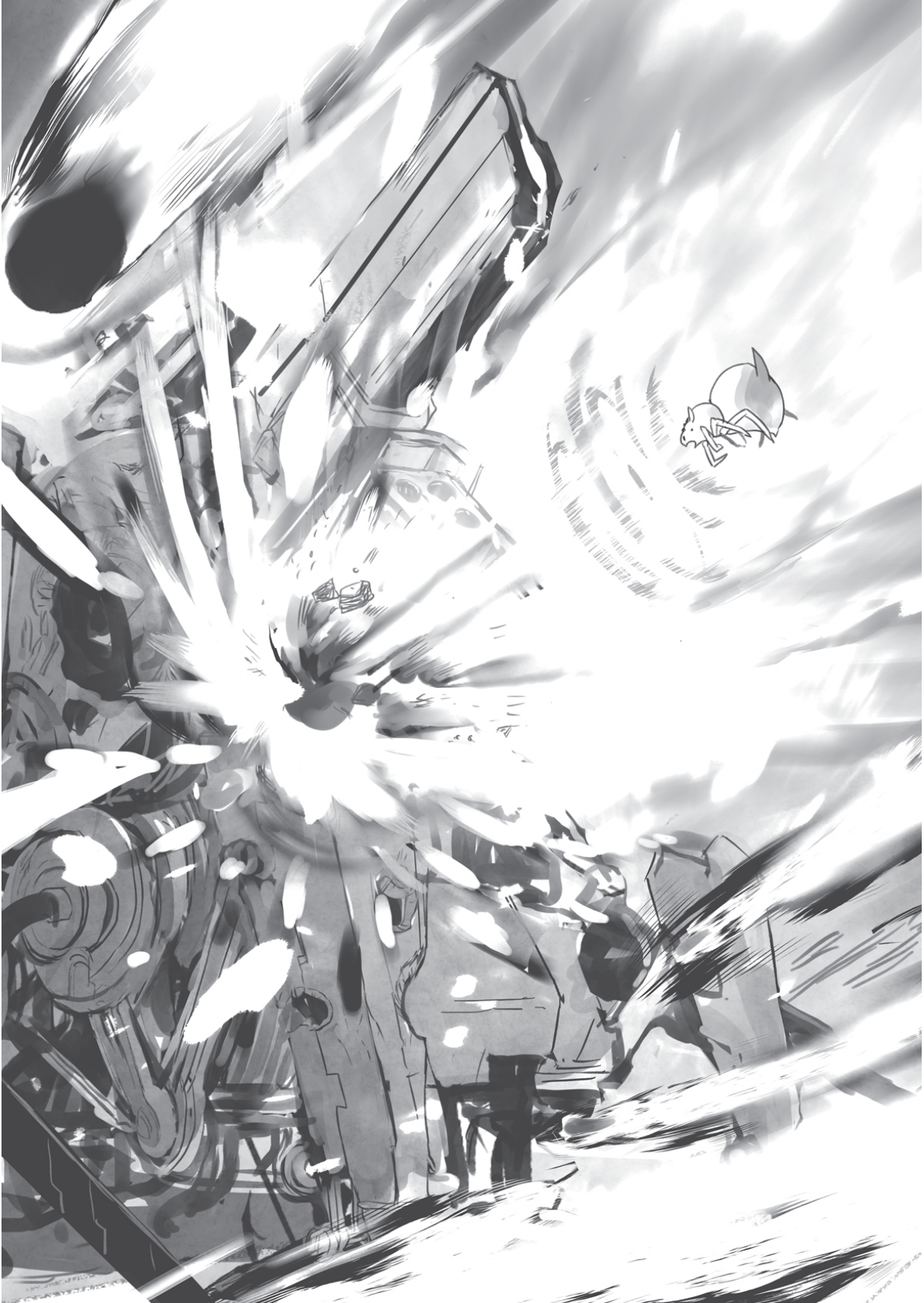
I mean, how's anyone supposed to react in time to an incredibly high-speed projectile suddenly flying at them from far away in an unexpected direction?

I guess that was a bit overboard, though.

Since I wiped out the group of mega-robots that were about to reach the empire army or whomever, the rest of them all turn around at once, starting

to be more wary of their surroundings.

Naturally, they set their sights on the battle clones instead.





I pulled off that round of surprise attacks by teleporting the battle clones next to the mega-robots right before shooting, but now that they're on their guard... No, wait, it's still gonna be easy.

I can just teleport them again and shoot from a new direction.

I know, it's not very fair that I get to take the first move every single time.

Cheap moves like this are probably why the Spatial Magic skill had limits like canceling any other spell you were preparing the moment you teleported.

How many times did I think to myself, *If only I could do both!*

But look at me now!

Since I've become a god, I have no such limitations!

Direct attacks with spatial conjurings don't work on the mega-robots' anti-technique barriers.

But there are no limits on how I can use spatial conjurings otherwise.

When it comes to teleporting my own battle clones or producing meteor bullets from there, I get to do whatever I want.

The only way to stop me would be to produce an anti-technique barrier in a wide radius, like Potimas's robot bodies, but it doesn't seem like these mega-robots can do that.

Even if they could, all I would have to do is shoot the meteor bullets from outside that range.

It takes spatial conjuring to shoot meteor bullets by taking them out of their separate dimension, but once that's done, they're really just pure physical attacks.

Even putting up an anti-technique barrier over a large radius wouldn't make a difference.

I did develop these to deal with Potimas personally, after all.

While we're at it, let's launch the second volley, or I guess the third if you count that first solo shot! Wooo!

Battle clones, teleport! And then, wait for iiiiit...meteor bullets, fiiiire!

And just like that, these super-powered mega-robots who are stronger than greater dragons get blown to bits by a single shot.

Awwww yeeeeeahhh!

Nothing like taking some unbelievably strong opponents and reducing them to scrap metal with an even more ridiculous technique!

Feels! Good! Man!

The mega-robots are strong, no doubt about it.

After all, the puppet spiders, who are in the “crazy strong” category by this world’s standards, couldn’t put a scratch on them.

Even I would have a tough time fighting them head-to-head.

Judging by their strength, I can only guess how much time and effort Potimas must have put into making these mega-robots.

And I’m turning that effort into dust in a matter of seconds!

Mmm, that’s the good stuff.

Just picturing Potimas’s sour expression about it could keep me going for days.

If all it takes to get that level of satisfaction is trashing a liiittle bit of forest in the process, it’s well worth the price of admission.

...Yeah, I know.

If I keep throwing around literal meteors, it’s definitely gonna mess up a good amount of this forest...

I’m shooting them sideways so they don’t crash into the ground, which means they’re not destroying the terrain too much, but there are obvious lines of destruction wherever the meteor bullets have passed through.

Environmental destruction. That’s no good.

Listen, though! It’s basically a force majeure!

A necessary sacrifice, or whatever you wanna call it!

Well, a big battle with a single top-tier dragon or equivalent monster can wreck an entire region, and we’ve got a thousand robots who are even stronger than that here. What did you expect...?

Why, I wouldn’t be surprised if the elf forest is completely razed to the ground by the time this battle’s over.

Sounds rich coming from the person who’s doing an excellent job of razing it to the ground, I know.

Especially since I’m spraying around even more meteor bullets and clearing more land even as we speak!

At this point, I can’t believe I ever thought I would have to sacrifice a considerable amount of battle clones to beat the mega-robots.

The teleport/meteor bullet combo is bringing them down so quickly it’s downright laughable.

The number of mega-robots keeps going down.

It's getting harder to take out several targets with a single shot at this point, but I can definitely destroy at least one per bullet.

Yep, I'd say things are going swimmingly!

At this rate, I'll wipe out every last mega-robot before you can say... Huh?

Looks like there have been other developments while I've been busy busting robots.

Vampy and Mr. Oni.

They're facing off against Yamada and friends.

And, hello?

Why does it look like Yamada is writhing in pain?

Vampy!

What did you do now?!



15 THE LORD LOOKS ON

“Thanks sooo much for your support, everyone!”

A familiar voice came from the television.

The male idol on the screen was one of the chimeras from this orphanage.

He happened to have a normal human appearance.

No, not entirely normal, I suppose—he was incredibly good-looking.

So he used those looks as an asset to get into the entertainment industry.

Here in the orphanage, a girl scowled at the boy on the screen.

They had a bitter breakup when he left to become an idol.

He insisted he wanted to get into entertainment, and she accused him of abandoning the orphanage.

Unlike him, this girl’s appearance was far from human.

The dragon genes she’d been made with were particularly strong, to the point where she essentially looked like a humanoid dragon.

That appearance made it virtually impossible for her to join human society; the orphanage was the only place she belonged.

I think that’s why she had a hard time accepting any of our brethren who left the orphanage.

At the time, more and more of the other kids were leaving the orphanage, not just the boy who went into the entertainment industry.

Although aside from him, the others tended to come back frequently, so it was more like they were spending nights away from home.

By this time, we were old enough to do such things.

Unfortunately, I had stopped growing several years ago, and looked younger than my actual age. My body just couldn’t get enough nutrition to grow.

It made little difference to me anyway, since I couldn’t be out of my

wheelchair for long.

Maybe I was a little jealous of the others who could grow normally, but I would never admit it.

Everyone else looked their age, and since some of them looked human or at least very close to it, they started setting out into the world more proactively.

There were even a handful of kids who were visibly inhuman at a glance, like those two rowdy boys, but still decided to go out into the world—not many, but there were a few.

The one thing they all had in common was that they felt they couldn't just keep depending on the orphanage forever.

They started striking out on their own, trying to become more independent, little by little.

The ones who stayed in the orphanage were kids with nowhere else to go, like me.

I returned my gaze from the television back to the object in my hands: a handkerchief I was embroidering.

It was a hobby I picked up when looking for something I could do even though I couldn't go outside.

I suppose it was one of the only things I *could* do.

But by doing embroidery, and occasionally other crafts like crocheting stuffed animals, I was able to sell some of my creations and earn a little money—only a very small amount, though.

While everyone else was trying to stand on their own, I felt lonely, as if I were being left behind.

“I'm home.”

Just then, a young man wearing an eye mask returned to the orphanage.

“Welcome back.”

“Welcome.”

“Thanks. Ah, he's on TV, huh?”

He must have heard the voice from the television and recognized the boy who'd become an idol.

“Guess he's working hard.”

“Who knows? I heard he might be sleeping his way to the top.”

There were rumors that some entertainers, mostly female but some male, sold their bodies to get jobs, or so I was told.

It was an urban legend of sorts, however; I have no idea if that actually occurred.

“Nah, I’m sure he’s got better judgment than that.”

“Doubt it.”

“****, that’s too far.”

“You’re defending him, Ariel?”

“Sure. **** is doing this for our sake, too.”

The idol boy donated the majority of his earnings to this orphanage in order to support kids like me who couldn’t leave.

Specifically, I think he was doing it for the girl who was now complaining about him.

As far as I could tell, the two of them were mutually in love.

“...Well, I never asked for that.”

“...I really think you should try to talk things over with him.”

These two seemed to be growing further apart because they didn’t fully understand each other, which was why I gave that advice.

But she stubbornly refused to make the first move.

“Maybe if he contacts me first. I mean, he hardly ever comes back to visit.”

...In the end, they were never able to make amends.

I was embroidering alone in silence.

This one was meant to be given as a gift, not sold.

“I’m home.”

“Welcome back.”

The boy in the eye mask came back, just like before.

As it happened, the embroidery I was working on was a handkerchief for that boy.

He was blind, so he wouldn’t be able to tell what the picture was from ordinary embroidery.

Thus, I was embroidering this one with extra bumps, trying to make it uneven enough that he would be able to identify the image by touch.

In this case, I was embroidering a flower.

And it wasn’t just him: I was making handkerchiefs for all the kids from the orphanage.

I hadn't given away any yet; I planned to give them out to everyone all at once when they were all completed.

But I wanted them to have proof that I existed.

As a memento to remember me by.

My health wasn't getting any better, not by a long shot.

When I was first taken in by the orphanage, it improved very slightly because of the better living conditions.

But ever since then, it had remained the same.

No matter how hard I tried, the distance I could walk without my wheelchair never grew.

If anything, as time passed, it only got shorter.

I was sure I didn't have much longer to live.

I could just feel it.

So I wanted to leave everyone with a physical object, so they wouldn't forget me.

"...Think you'll finish?"

"Uh-huh. I should manage to be done in time."

I hadn't told anyone that I was going to give the handkerchiefs I was embroidering to everyone as gifts.

But the boy with the eye mask was something of a leader in the orphanage, and even though he couldn't see, he kept close watch over all of us.

Because of that, I think he had figured out more or less what I was trying to do.

My health was stable at the time, but if I caught a cold during the changing of the seasons or something like that, there was no telling what might happen.

For all I knew, I could drop dead at any moment.

So I wanted to finish the presents as soon as I could, and give them out to everyone.

But I didn't want to give them something shoddy because I was rushing too much, either.

I made each one with care, thinking of the recipient as I worked.

I wanted my feelings to sink into every stitch.

As everyone started to become independent, I felt like I was being left behind.

But I was sure that in the end, I would be the one to leave them behind instead.

I did manage to finish those handkerchiefs and give them to everyone.

But ultimately, I was still the one who got left behind.

“Is Sariel here?”

That day, Gülie came to the orphanage.

He visited from time to time.

From my point of view, around the time when the orphanage first opened, I don’t believe he was particularly conscious of Lady Sariel.

But the more they saw of each other, the more interested he became.

That’s how it looked to me, anyway.

There wasn’t any sudden, dramatic development or anything.

But if you build up enough ordinary, casual exchanges, eventually that can develop into love.

I lived in a very small, sheltered world, myself, but I still felt impressed that love could work in such a way.

“Lady Sariel is out right now.”

“...I see.”

Looking obviously disappointed, Gülie handed me the gift of confections he’d brought.

As usual, it was a variety of soft gelatin desserts, perhaps out of consideration for my diet.

If only he could have been as considerate toward Lady Sariel, but alas, this man always managed to fumble where it mattered most and ended up failing in his efforts to impress her.

“...If you want to see her so badly, you should really show how happy you are when you do get to meet.”

“...It is not like that.”

In spite of his claims, everyone at the orphanage knew how Gülie felt by now.

“You’ll never get through to Lady Sariel with that attitude. She’s tragically dense enough about this kind of thing as it is.”

“...I told you, it is not like that.”

I shook my head and heaved a dramatic sigh.

“Hrm? Embroidery, eh?”

“Uh-huh.”

Gülie appeared to be trying to change the subject, and landed on the project in my hands.

“Should I make one for you too, Gülie?”

I made the suggestion without really thinking.

Since I could never leave the orphanage, Gülie’s frequent visits made him quite possibly my closest friend from the outside world.

So I thought it might be nice to leave him with a handkerchief, too.

“You ought to make one for Sariel before you bother making one for me.”

“Of course. I already have.”

Lady Sariel’s handkerchief was the very first one I made.

“Well, then, if you feel so inclined at some point, I would appreciate it.”

Gülie smiled softly and patted my head.

“But do not push yourself, all right?”

“...You should really show that kindness toward Lady Sariel.”

“...I keep telling you, it is nothing like that.”

“Hello, I have returned.”

Just then, Lady Sariel happened to come in.

“S-Sariel?!”

“Yes. Gülie. Welcome.”

“D-Did you hear our conversation just now?”

“No. I do not eavesdrop on other people’s conversations.”

“I-I see.”

Gülie was very clearly relieved.

But knowing Lady Sariel, even if she had overheard, she wouldn’t have figured out Gülie’s feelings anyway...

“So, what business brings you here, Gülie?”

“Nothing. Just ensuring that everyone is in good health.”

Gülie glanced in my direction as he spoke.

Why would he try to steer the subject toward me?

Now Lady Sariel was going to assume that he came to check up on me.

He should have just admitted that he came to see her...

It was incredibly frustrating watching Gülie bumble around like this.

But since Gülie and Lady Sariel were a dragon and an angel respectively, beings with all the time in the world, perhaps there was no need to rush.

Since I later became a similar being myself, I suppose I understand that feeling a little.

Still, there are times when you should really act while you have the chance, or you might come to regret it later.

Even now, I think Gülie should have tried to woo Lady Sariel more directly.

I have no way of knowing if she would have reciprocated, but either way, I am sure Gülie wouldn't regret things as much as he does now.

Because he'll never have another chance to woo Lady Sariel now.

...That reminds me, I never ended up making Gülie a handkerchief.

I wanted to finish them for everyone in the orphanage first, leaving his for later.

And in the end, I just barely managed to complete the gifts for them just in time.

...Right before the day when we would have to be separated from Lady Sariel.

After that, the system was created, and the world plunged into chaos.

With so much going on, I forgot all about making a handkerchief for Gülie.

...I know.

Once this is all over, when I have time, I'll make Gülie's handkerchief.

Yes, this time for sure...



RUMINATE: MA ENERGY

The same vampire incident that affected Foduey also landed Potimas's name at the top of wanted lists all over the world.

Cautious though he was, his actions were on far too large a scale.

In the end, even he couldn't hide all of his many activities.

But of course, he was never the sort of person to simply go on the run.

What an obstinate man.

Around the time Potimas became a wanted criminal, he unveiled a certain research breakthrough.

Namely: the theory of MA energy.

If one's Taboo skill reaches level 10, details revolving around the term *MA energy* become clear.

Even without that, it is likely that some have heard the phrase before.

After all, it is the gravest sin the people of this world ever committed.

Much time has passed since then, and most have forgotten what occurred in those days, but I suspect there are still some who continue to speak of it.

Dustin, the very pontiff of the Word of God religion, is one individual who knows the truth.

It would not surprise me if he secretly distributed some fragmentary form of that information within the creed of his church.

Hmmm? That phrasing makes it sound as if I am not overly familiar with the creed of the Word of God, you say?

Indeed, I am not.

I do not know the details of the Word of God religion.

Is that really so surprising?

To be perfectly frank, I have no interest in such a thing.

...You think that a cruel reason?

Perhaps so.

But give it some thought.

Dustin invented the Word of God religion in order to save humanity.

If you look past the details of the creed on the surface, its true nature is a tool of human supremacy.

It seeks to save humanity no matter the sacrifice, be it demons or even gods such as myself.

That is all.

Why in the world would I have any interest in the very creed that chose to save humanity by sacrificing Sariel?

I understand why Dustin chose to steer things in that direction.

It is essentially a reflection of his personal resolve.

So I do not blame him.

But I am free to have my own personal opinion of it, am I not?

Perhaps it is petty of me, but I could never bring myself to compromise on that matter.

Although I like to think I have remained neutral as an administrator.

In fact, as far as their opposition to Potimas goes, I have always been in full support of that.

But speaking of Potimas, let us return to the matter at hand.

The MA energy theory he developed shook the entire world.

Incidentally, from what I am told, the methods of accumulating energy in the reincarnations' world were largely physical.

Instead of using magic or conjurings, they used natural materials such as oil and sunlight.

Our world was similar back then; the energy needed for everyday human activities was acquired through physical means.

Even with the existence of beings like dragons and Sariel, that aspect was no different from the world of the reincarnations.

But MA energy changed that forever.

At this point, perhaps you have gathered some inkling of the nature of this so-called MA energy.

Indeed, MA energy is a form of energy gathered through magical means, by way of conjuring.

For humans, who had always gotten their energy from physical sources, the MA energy construction theory that Potimas developed must have

seemed like a way to create something out of nothing.

Indeed, MA energy was described as such: a miraculous energy that comes from nothing.

Unlimited energy that could be used indefinitely, without causing any harm to the environment.

...How very foolish.

As if such a thing could possibly exist.

Every resource has a limit.

That truth applies to everything physical, magical, and otherwise.

But humans did not understand that.

No, that is not entirely true. Some of them did.

Dustin was one such person.

However, the majority of humans will only believe things that are convenient for them.

All the more so when they are desperate.

The quickest to jump to MA energy were the most desperate of humans...

...especially the humans—or rather, nations—who were most impoverished.

The wealth disparity between the human nations was staggering.

The poorest of them saw hope in the form of MA energy.

The MA energy theory Potimas made public only described the method of acquiring MA energy.

Most people were skeptical when it was first announced, but the nations most in need used it nonetheless.

I believe it was what the reincarnations would call “grasping at straws”?

But indeed, these “straws” allowed those nations to successfully recover, at least at first.

MA energy certainly is an effective energy source, at least by all appearances.

The nations that used it to solve their energy crises quickly made advancements.

There were objections from the nations that relied on exports of resources like oil, but I shall omit such details, as they are no longer relevant.

And as the impoverished nations began growing rapidly with MA

energy, the more developed countries began to use it as well.

No doubt they were loath to be left behind by what they viewed as lesser nations.

Thus, slowly but surely, more nations began to deal in MA energy.

Not all of them, however.

There were some nations that refused to use MA energy. Their reasons varied: MA energy was developed by a wanted criminal like Potimas, the nature of MA energy was still unknown, oil-producing countries still objected to the rise of MA energy, and so on.

The place where Dustin was president was one such nation.

His nation was large and influential. If they took a strong stance against MA energy, other nations were bound to hesitate as well.

However, it is a difficult thing to halt the flow of progress.

Before long, more and more humans began approving of the use of MA energy, seeing that it had the visible effect of solving the energy crisis.

On top of that, there was another breakthrough theory that Potimas released along with the MA energy theory.

Namely, the theory of evolution by way of MA energy.

Essentially, it suggested that MA energy could be used to make humans evolve.

It was like a progress report of the results of Potimas's research on evolutions like vampirism.

But even if it was incomplete by his standards, humanity could not ignore those results.

By consuming huge amounts of MA energy for a surgical treatment, humans could advance to a new stage.

There were two major changes:

Improved physical capabilities and a longer lifespan.

The latter especially attracted attention.

Because the procedure required a massive amount of MA energy, it was primarily only the richest humans who could undergo it.

Until then, a longer life was the one thing their money could not buy, no matter how much they wanted it.

It unfortunately did not grant perpetual youth and immortality, but it was still an exchange of money for more time to live.

Small wonder that humans would jump at the chance.

Many advanced countries lifted their ban on MA energy because their richest citizens demanded it for this procedure.

Compared to all of humanity, there were very few who actually got the procedure.

Based on the population at the time, at least.

At any rate, their consumption of MA energy was far too high.

The humans seemed to think that it was an endless source of energy, but it could not be collected all at once.

Though most of the nations in the world were able to get enough of it to completely cover their operations.

But the amount of MA energy required for evolution was so unthinkable high that eventually there was not enough to go around.

I imagine that is why Dustin loathed those who underwent the procedure.

Though they were human themselves, he considers them separate beings, the enemies of humankind.

Which is why he calls the descendants of those who chose to evolve “demons.”

By expending huge amounts of MA energy for their own personal gain, they ultimately hastened the destruction of the world.

They were once the wealthy, privileged class of humanity.

When I think of how demonkind, who descended from them, is now teetering on the brink of extinction, it is hard to describe my feelings.

I suppose that was their punishment in a way.

But putting aside the origin of demons, the use of MA energy that started with the poorer nations eventually spread to developing and advanced nations as well.

There were few nations that objected.

At that point, it may have only been Dustin.

But there were some who were not from these nations who continued to object.

Namely, we dragons, and Sarel.

MA energy was collected by way of magical conjuring.

So those of us who were well versed in magic immediately recognized its true nature.

That is why we tried to warn them.

“Do not use MA energy.”

I suppose the current state of this world proves whether they heeded those warnings.

Indeed, the humans refused to listen.

They were not sufficiently fearful of dragons, I believe, in spite of the fact that we had destroyed a whole nation of theirs overnight in the past.

At that time, that particular nation somehow became possessed with the insane notion to drop a new kind of bomb on the home of dragons.

Of course, such things could never destroy us.

But we still wiped out that nation as our revenge.

Yet, that major event was only recorded in textbooks by the era of MA energy; there were few living humans who actually remembered it.

As generations passed, the fear we instilled in them naturally weakened.

Though the event still seemed recent from a dragon point of view, to humans it was already far in the past.

But since that was the only time we had majorly interfered with humanity, out of deference to Sariel, perhaps we sowed the seeds of ruin.

It allowed humans the wishful thinking that dragons were not actually so frightening, that they could ignore our warning.

In essence, they weighed the threat of dragons against the boon of MA energy and ruled in favor of the latter.

Our warnings were thus ignored, but Sariel was put in a difficult position as well.

For she was being pressured by her own employees in the Sariella Foundation.

The energy crisis was a problem of utmost import for those who worked in medical care, for the latest medical equipment could not operate without energy.

On top of that, the theory of MA energy evolution proved invaluable for research into treating previously incurable diseases.

Indeed, to the medical community, MA energy was a beacon of hope.

And of course, as I described before, the lower classes were helped immensely by MA energy.

Since the Sariella Foundation existed to support the less fortunate, they could not condone dropping the use of MA energy entirely.

Had Foduey been in good health, perhaps he could have handled this

internal strife of sorts, but he had been quarantined because of his vampiric transformation.

Frankly, the Sariella Foundation had also become too large thanks to Foduey's support.

So large, in fact, that the word of Sariel alone could not determine their direction, even though she was the founder and president.

Because her own organization was turning against her, Sariel ended up withdrawing from the public eye.

Since they had also just recently taken in the children who were victims of Potimas's human experiments, she devoted her energy to managing the orphanage instead.

I still cannot say whether that was for the best or not...

The children from that orphanage, including Ariel, would go on to have a major effect on the future.

That likely would not have been the case were they not so closely involved with Sariel, which makes me wonder whether things would have gone differently otherwise.

Thus, Sariel's influence was forced out of the Sariella Foundation.

But neither she nor I and the other dragons could tolerate the humans' actions just because they refused to heed our warnings.

We knew all too well that things would go disastrously wrong before too long if they continued down this path.

Why? Because MA energy is an exploitation of the life force of the planet.

Planets have a life force, just like living things.

We gods absorb the excess energy given off by the planet in order to live.

Perhaps it is akin to how plants produce oxygen and animals produce carbon dioxide.

But that was not so for the MA energy humans were taking.

They were not using surplus that was naturally released, but forcibly extracting the energy the planet required to live.

If they kept this up, the planet was bound to weaken and eventually fall apart.

The dragons and Sariel alike told them to stop in order to prevent that.

We explained the reason too, of course.

...But as I said before, humans only believe things that are convenient for them.

And they will always find an excuse not to believe something that isn't.

Foolish.

Truly foolish.

I am sure the cost of that foolishness was higher than the humans could have imagined.

When did humanity forget their fear of dragons...?

And why did they optimistically assume the dragons would not act on their fury...?

I still remember it clearly.

The elders summoned all dragons for a gathering.

There, they made the announcement.

“We will cull the humans.”

That day, the dragons bared their fangs against humanity.

GÜLIE

Full name Güliedistodiez. A true dragon. As one born to a transcendent race, he always looked down on humans as a lesser species. But after meeting the likes of Sariel and Foduey, his perspective changed. At first he disapproved of Sariel, but as he became increasingly aware of her, his feelings eventually turned to infatuation. Unfortunately, his excessive pride prevented him from approaching her; the children of the orphanage took notice and teased him for his bumbling. During the confrontation between dragons and humans over MA energy, he withdrew from the other dragons and became "lost."





Interlude

POTIMAS AND THE POPULARIZATION OF MA ENERGY

Annoyingly enough, I have become a wanted man.

But no matter. The popularization of MA energy is succeeding.

The evolution theory, too.

Chances are slim, but perhaps someone will use these two theses and produce more successful research than I have.

It is not as if I must only find the path to eternal life on my own, after all.

Certainly that would be the surest and most reliable way, but if someone else were to find the key to eternal life instead, it would still be cause for celebration.

My research has hit a wall.

Just as I disclosed in my evolution theory, I have succeeded in prolonging the lifespan.

Truth be told, I have additionally found an evolution to another race that extends the lifespan even further.

For convenience, I have evolved into this species, which I call “elves.”

But my life is only longer now; it is not eternal.

More research is required, but that would necessitate massive amounts of MA energy.

There is a limit to how much MA energy one individual can gather.

That is why I popularized it.

If they learn the true nature of MA energy, the dragons will likely not stand silently by, but let them do what they may.

It matters not what using MA energy might do to this planet.

Research requires sacrifices.

As long as my research succeeds before the planet is destroyed, all will be well.

Should the planet perish before then, I shall simply abandon it and go elsewhere.

I have no use for a place where I cannot do research.

Why should I bother with a pitiful planet that cannot even grant one person eternal life?

I have already made preparations to take off into space.

From the moment we started using MA energy, this planet was already doomed to die, sooner or later.

I shall squeeze out every last drop that serves my research.

The other humans can deal with the wrath of the dragons for me.

Either way, when this planet falls to ruin, they will all go down with it.

They can at least be of use to me before they die.



SHOWDOWN: CHANCE MEETING

I'm a little worried about Yamada and friends, but before I head over there...

I summon four battle clones and put the puppet spiders on top of them.

That way, if they find themselves in serious trouble, they should be able to get away using the battle clones' teleportation.

Gotta say, though—the sight of a six-armed girl on top of a battle clone, aka a three-foot-tall spider...

So this is what you'd call creepy-cute!

The puppet spiders dash away gallantly atop their battle clones.

Hmm. They looked kinda pumped up about it, but I'm sure that's just my imagination.

Anyway, now that I have nothing else to worry about, I'll head over to see what's happening with Yamada and the others.

Teleportation, activate!

So, now I'm on the scene and all, and... What exactly is this chaotic situation here?

First of all, Yamada is curled up on the ground clutching his head.

He doesn't appear to be unconscious, but he's definitely in serious pain of some kind.

And for some reason, a half-elf is lying next to him.

Umm, what was her name again? Anna?

Then you've got Ooshima, who's sitting close to Yamada and holding him.

Hyrince and Shinohara are standing in front of Yamada, as if to protect him.

Ms. Oka is a little way behind them.

Plus, Tagawa and Kushitani are on the ground, too, totally knocked out.

As if all that wasn't chaotic enough, Natsume is standing there giving Vampy a total death glare, and Vampy is glaring right back at him, making zero attempt to hide her desire to kill him.

Mr. Oni appears to have no interest in those two; he's just staring at Yamada, looking bewildered.

Um, hello?

What's going on here?

Someone explain, please!

But there's no time to stand around being confused because things are only getting worse.

So I decide to take care of the most immediate danger first: namely, getting between Vampy and Natsume.

Or rather, I teleport behind Natsume, but close enough...

For now, I reach out slowly, careful that he doesn't notice me.

Then I grab him hard by the back of the head.

...Why couldn't I have done things more gracefully after reaching out so slowly?

There's no time for that, fool!

Just like that, I give the order to the spider clone living inside Natsume's head to put him to sleep for a little while.

While I'm at it, I might as well take back the little parasite spider, too.

The role I needed Natsume to play is pretty much taken care of at this point.

He can do whatever he wants from here on out.

Whatever happens as a result is his own responsibility.

You might think it's cruel to just abandon him after using him so much, but remember, Natsume was already up to no good before we started taking advantage of him.

So just tell yourself he deserves it, thank you very much!

The tiny clone crawls out from Natsume's ear, and I take it back.

As I do so, Natsume passes out on the ground.

"Master, could you not interfere, please?"

Vampy stomps over to me, looking blatantly annoyed.

Look, if I *didn't* interfere, you totally would've killed Natsume, am I right?

I don't know what happened, but you can't just go around killing people

whenever you get the urge.

You should try getting more calcium.

...That reminds me, apparently the puppet spiders used to feed Vampy bones for a while.

Maybe she's been so moody because of a bone deficiency?

Aren't vampires supposed to drink blood, not eat bones?

"It can't be... But how?"

Oops.

I got so distracted with pointless thoughts that Ms. Oka said something to me.

Or at least, she whispered something to herself *about* me, anyway.

"Hello again, Ms. Oka."

I decide to give her a response.

Vampy and Mr. Oni look openly taken aback by my reaction.

L-look, I can greet people if I really want to, okay!

Even if it's mostly just because it's Ms. Oka we're talking about!

"Wakaba...?"

Yamada groans, notices me, and murmurs that name.

Then he passes out, like a marionette whose strings have been cut.

He doesn't seem to be dead. But judging by the state he was in before he fainted, I can't assume he's fine, either.

I've got to check on his condition and treat him right away.

So I take a step forward, only to be stopped by someone standing in my way.

It's Ooshima, looking at me desperately and brandishing a broken sword, trying to protect Yamada.

Look, I'm trying to save him, okay? Don't give me that "if you want to get near him, you'll have to kill me first!" kind of look.

I glance over at Hyrince, who's standing right next to Ooshima, but he has the nerve to ignore my "do something about this!" look.

In fact, he's blocking my way right alongside Ooshima.

Is he saying that he's going to keep acting the part of Hyrince here, not Güli-güli?

Hm. Hmmm.

If that's how Güli-güli's acting, is it safe to assume that means Yamada's condition isn't an emergency?

I guess there's no need to panic, then.

In that case, I guess my next move is to punish the person who caused all this chaos.

"Why does it seem like you're giving off an extremely threatening aura right now, Master? Is it just my imagination?"

Oh, it's extremely real, Vampy my dear.

I know you must've made some careless decision that led to all this!

Now spit it out, pronto!

What did you do?!

"Oh, don't give me that accusatory look. I didn't do anything, all right? I don't think it's very nice that you always assume it's my fault whenever something like this happens, Master."

Liar!

"Wakaba...that's you, right? What's going on here?! What did you do to Shun?!"

Ooshima is yelling at me, but it's going to have to wait, because I'm in the middle of interrogating the person I suspect of actually doing something to Shun.

"Ms. White, we really didn't do anything."

Just as I'm about to grab Vampy by the scruff of her neck and force her to confess everything, Mr. Oni unexpectedly steps in to defend her!

"Shun did something to that half-elf there and suddenly started writhing in agony. Based on the circumstances, I'm guessing he used some kind of skill and got hit with side effects or something?"

Vampy nods along vigorously to Mr. Oni's calm appraisal.

"In fact, if anyone did something wrong, it's me, not Sophia."

Mr. Oni looks at me apologetically.

Huh? It wasn't this idiot who keeps nodding with a triumphant grin?

"I cut down that half-elf, and Shun healed her, but in the next instant he was on the ground writhing in pain. At least, that's what it looked like to me."

Great analysis, Mr. Oni.

Very concise and easy to understand.

Hmm? Wait, he healed her and then fell over in pain?

"Incidentally, unless I'm sorely mistaken, there was no way he should have been able to heal that half-elf. It was definitely a fatal wound. No

matter how good at magic Shun might be, he couldn't have possibly saved her in time."

Hmmm?

Wait, what? You're telling me that the half-elf lying next to Yamada is dead?

But she's totally breathing... She's definitely just passed out, right?

Which can only mean... Yamada used his Mercy skill to bring her back to life?

"Did Shun bring her back from the dead somehow? I mean, there's no way an ability like that would come without a price, right? I don't know what the consequence is, but it would explain why Shun seems to be in so much pain. So don't blame that on us, Kanata."

That last part is directed at Ooshima, who's still gamely holding up a broken sword.

Ooshima's eyes are full of confusion, yet there's also the glimmer of someone trying to assess the situation, desperately looking for a way out of this mess.

But I don't have time to worry about that right now.

I'm breaking out in a cold sweat over here.

In a way, isn't it kinda my fault that Yamada went down?

Like, if he used Mercy and then fell over in pain, that's gotta mean his Taboo maxed out, yeah?

The cost of using Mercy is the Taboo skill leveling up.

That in itself wouldn't cause any pain...unless it maxed out Taboo.

I experienced that for myself, and let me tell you, I still remember how nauseous I felt whether I want to or not.

Yeah. It's no wonder he passed out.

That being said, I happen to know that there was a certain mastermind who deliberately dropped dead bodies in front of Yamada to make him raise his Taboo level.

Oops! It was me!

Yep, it's my fault that Yamada's Taboo skill maxed out!

Mr. Oni might have given him the final push, but the fact is that I'm the one who set him up for it.

Yikes, I'm in no position to be accusing Vampy...

"Still, Kanata, aren't you freaking out too much over Shun just passing

out?”

While I’m mulling over how to hide this little fact, Mr. Oni conveniently changes the subject.

“Shun is still alive. He’s not dead. And this is a battlefield, where death occurs at a moment’s notice. So why are you getting into such a panic over someone fainting a little? Don’t tell me you’re standing here without being prepared to die, or to lose someone?”

A crackling aura of intimidation surges out from Mr. Oni.

It’s so intense that the imperial and elf armies fighting nearby freeze in their tracks.

Poor Ooshima takes the brunt of it to the face, resulting in a whole lot of shaking and sweat.

Seriously, it’s like someone dumped a bucket of water over the kid, to the point where I’m amazed Ooshima is still standing at all.

“If you’re seriously here with such a half-assed level of resolve, I’m disappointed in you. You don’t know the truth, you’re not prepared to find out, and yet you still waltz in here convinced that you’re the heroes? It’s so stupid it goes past funny to the point of being infuriating. I would hate to think that my former friend is such an idiot now.”

Mr. Oni makes an uncharacteristic show of disgust as he insults his old friend.

He’s glossing over his anger with sheer intimidation, but something about it seems false.

Well, I’m sure he has a lot of mixed feelings since they used to be best friends and all.

As for his unlucky target, Ooshima is just barely conscious from the onslaught of Mr. Oni’s intimidation.

“Kanata. This is your first and only warning. Put down your weapons and surrender. Otherwise, I’m going to cut you down, whether we were friends or not. *That’s* what real resolve looks like.”

I seriously doubt he intends to do that, but Mr. Oni puts all the force of his intimidation behind the declaration.

That ends up being the final straw.

Ooshima’s legs give way, sending the poor kid slumping to the ground.

I guess sometimes your instincts get ahead of your reason and decide to surrender for you, especially when it’s already so obvious how much

stronger your enemy is.

Everybody's got limits, y'know?

I wonder if the despair Ooshima feels now is similar to how I felt the first time I ran into Araba.

The kind of opponent where you can tell by their presence alone that you don't stand a chance, that the difference between you is just too insurmountable...

Anyway, Ooshima loses the will to fight and retires from battle.

Yamada, the half-elf, Tagawa, and Kushitani are all down for the count, too.

That just leaves Ms. Oka, Shinohara, and a bonus Hyrince.

"Hey, Wakaba, I thought you were dead."

One of those survivors, Shinohara, starts talking to me through Telepathy.

From what I've gathered, Ms. Oka thought I was dead this whole time.

D told me that Ms. Oka got a unique skill that told her the current state of all the reincarnations, and apparently it said that Wakaba Hihiro was dead.

I'm guessing it's because I turned into a god and got removed from the system, probably...

Like, the system couldn't find me anymore, so for the sake of convenience it just displays that I'm dead.

Well...the real Wakaba Hihiro, aka D, never actually got reincarnated into this world in the first place, and her stand-in (me) isn't dead, which means Ms. Oka's information is full of holes at this point...

Since Ms. Oka's eyes are focused on an empty patch of air, I'm guessing she's checking that unique skill right now.

"...Are you really Wakaba?"

"Yes."

The real answer is no, but explaining that would take ages, and even the Demon Lord doesn't know about the real relationship between D and me.

It's easier just to say yes for now.

"But..."

"Your skill can't detect me as I am now, Ms. Oka."

"What?!"

Ms. Oka looks super surprised.

So do Vampy and Mr. Oni, although it's obviously because they're

watching me hold a proper conversation...

L-look, I can talk to people a little bit if I really try!

UGH!

"I would love to rekindle our relationship and explain all manner of things, but I believe we are both quite preoccupied at the moment. Let us discuss things another time."

I'm going to have to shut down this conversation for now, even if it is a little rude.

It's not because I can't bear to talk for another second, okay?

It's just that a teeeeny little problem has cropped up elsewhere.

The kind that I'm gonna have to run over and deal with personally.

So I'll leave this in the capable hands of Vam... Haha, nope, let's go with Mr. Oni.

"Tell the imperial army and demon army to retreat."

"Retreat?" Mr. Oni blinks in confusion at my command. "What about the elves?"

"Focus on retreating."

I would prefer to wipe out the elves completely, but there's no time for that right now.

As for Yamada and the gang, I'll let Hyrince take care of that.

I open my eyes for just a moment and give him a meaningful look.

That should convey what I want to say, or at least, I sure hope so...

Basically, I'd like him to convince Ms. Oka and Shinohara to gather the others up and retreat.

Because I'm not sure if I can guarantee that this area will be safe for much longer.

"...All right. Be careful, Ms. White."

"Hey, wait a minute. I can still fight, you know."

Vampy looks indignant, but unfortunately, the next stage of this battle while be tough even for her.

She could probably take on a single mega-robot on her own relatively unharmed, but something even worse has just shown up.

I have no time to stand around and convince her, so I'll just hope that Mr. Oni is up to the task.

For now, I teleport away.

As soon as I arrive at my destination, I feel the very air shaking.

That would be the aftershocks from the most intense battle of the many currently taking place all over the elf village.

On one side is the queen, one of the world's strongest monsters, commanding the taratect troops.

On the other is the elves' ultimate weapon.

Yep, they've finally busted it out.

A weapon that makes even the mega-robots I fought before look like a child's playthings.

The mega-robots were more powerful than even a top-class dragon, but it's obvious at a glance that this thing is even stronger.

The first thing I see when I arrive is the taratect troops getting utterly decimated.

From the smallest spiders that I once started out as, to the bigger spiders that are the grown version of those, to the even bigger spiders that have grown and evolved further—they're all getting equally crushed without a chance to fight back.

That even includes the queen.

Their enemy is floating in the air.

If I were to describe it in a word or two, I would use *sea urchin*.

It's a sphere around thirty feet in diameter.

With countless spikes sticking out of it.

Yep. It's a sea urchin.

A giant, metal sea urchin.

I don't know how to react to its physical appearance, but its power is nothing to laugh about.

Every one of its spikes is a gun barrel, carpet-bombing the entire area.

There's nowhere to run.

A hail of bullets rains down everywhere, scorching the ground into a blackened wasteland.

The forest is being blown away, and so are the taratect troops.

Even the queen can't escape, the bullets riddling her body with holes.

At her giant size, she's an easy target for the bombing.

Normally the queen can dodge enemy attacks with her surprising speed, but I guess that won't work when the bullets are covering far too wide of a range to escape.

The queen taratect is still no slouch, though.

Maintaining the pride of royalty even under fire, she's still gathering energy in the self-contradictory form of black light in her mouth.

A breath attack.

The full power of a strongest-class monster unleashed in energy form.

A dense black beam flies toward the sea urchin floating in the air.

The beam of light blows away the bullets fired by the sea urchin, surging toward the source to obliterate it and reach all the way to space.

I could easily imagine that happening, it was so powerful.

If it hits, the queen's full-powered attack boasts enough destructive power to blow away even an entire mountain and change the very landscape.

Surely it would be strong enough to destroy a thirty-foot-wide lump of metal without a trace.

And yet, the sea urchin is intact.

The breath attack definitely hit.

It didn't even attempt to dodge.

Almost as if to say that it didn't need to.

The barrier around the sea urchin erased the queen's breath attack.

Not just blocked—*erased*.

It wiped out that entire powerful attack, as if it had never been there in the first place.

The mega-robots were equipped with anti-technique barriers, too.

But this one seems to be considerably higher power.

I'm sure the queen's breath attack could have pierced the mega-robots' barrier.

Even if it couldn't destroy them in one blow, it would have at least done considerable damage.

But it didn't put a scratch on this sea urchin.

If her breath attack doesn't work on it, there's nothing the queen can do.

Long-distance attacks get blocked by the sea urchin's barrier.

That just leaves pure physical attacks, but the nonstop rain of bullets makes that impossible.





The queen tries to use Spatial Maneuvering to get up into the air, but she's pinned down to the ground by bullets, unable to take a single step.

Each bullet whittles away at her body, and the next one strikes before she can regenerate.

The queen, who's just as powerful as Mother was, is getting beaten down without a chance to fight back.

What a terrifying weapon Potimas has developed.

Am I crazy, or could a single one of these things take over the entire world?

Though I assume it would be difficult to get enough ammo, or energy for it to run, or something.

That being said, it doesn't seem to be running low on bullets at all.

There must be a spatial expansion or something inside, with the bullets being stored in another dimension.

Otherwise this wouldn't make any sense.

Wait, this is no time to stand around casually observing the thing.

At this rate, the queen is going to go down.

Guess I'd better step in before that happens and shoot down the sea urchin myself!

All right, fire a meteor bullet!

The meteor bullet lands a direct hit on the sea urchin!

It's so loud it practically ruptures my eardrums, to the point where I'd even call it more of a shock wave than a sound.

Gaaaah! My eeeears!

What the hell was that?!

Why'd it make a way bigger boom than when I hit the mega-robots?!

Then the answer becomes painfully clear.

The sea urchin is still intact.

You've gotta be kidding me...

How can anything be alive and well after taking a direct hit from a meteor bullet...?

I guess that boom was the sound of the sea urchin blocking it.

Okay, that barrier must have a two-layer structure.

The meteor bullet is too powerful an attack to block with high physical resistance alone.

So the natural conclusion is that the barrier also defends against physical

attacks.

I'm guessing the inner layer is the physical-defense barrier, and the outer layer is the anti-technique barrier.

If it were the other way around, the anti-technique barrier would cancel out the other one.

So magical and conjuring attacks are prevented by the anti-technique barrier, while physical attacks are prevented by the physical-defense barrier.

How much energy must it cost to operate a weapon like this...?

Damn you, Potimas! Don't go using up this world's valuable energy to make crap like this!

I know complaining to him won't get me anywhere, but I still wanna say it!

Grrr...

What am I gonna do about this, though...?

I don't have any method for piercing a two-layer barrier.

I mean, it's not that I can't do it, y'know?

But it would mean using up a massive amount of energy myself to do it.

Honestly, that would be a waste.

So I'll have to try another way.

The truth is, I didn't really wanna resort to this.

But you can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs.

When I busted out the meteor bullets, I realized that you can't let the right moment pass you by to use one of your trump cards.

It would be way worse to hold back now and let this sea urchin do whatever it wants.

So I'll use another one of mine now, too!

I open my eyes.

Focus all my power in my pupils.

Then I set my sights on the sea urchin.

Activate Gluttonous Evil Eye!

This is a new Evil Eye I developed after becoming a god.

Its ability is modeled after the Demon Lord's Gluttony skill, hence the naming scheme.

Basically, it absorbs energy from the target.

Any conjuring that enters my line of sight can be broken down into energy and absorbed.

Strictly speaking, the anti-technique barrier around the sea urchin is itself a kind of conjuring.

A conjuring that obstructs and dispels other conjurings.

That's all the barrier really is.

In which case, you just need to develop a conjuring to erase a conjuring...that erases other conjurings.

That got me thinking about the Demon Lord's Seven Deadly Sins skill, Gluttony.

Gluttony's ability can convert anything at all into energy, and then consume it.

By analyzing that principle, I figured out a way to focus the energy conversion on conjurings, and repurposed it into this Gluttonous Evil Eye.

It's one of the trump cards I developed in case I need to fight Güli-güli.

Which is why I didn't really want him to see it, but oh well.

Since I developed it for use on a literal god like Güli-güli, Gluttonous Evil Eye's effects are the real deal.

It easily devours the anti-technique barrier, then the physical-defense barrier underneath that, and even the conjuring that keeps the sea urchin floating in the air, sending the thing crashing into the ground.

Where the queen is lying in wait.

The sea urchin tries to defend itself by firing bullets, but now that it's fallen to the ground without its barriers, it doesn't stand a chance.

The queen's giant fangs pierce the metallic sea urchin and tear it into scrap metal.

We've won.

Or so I thought—but then the sea urchin explodes.

The queen gets hit with that explosion at point-blank distance.

Her upper body gets blown away without a trace, and the remaining lower body crumples lifeless to the ground.

NO! Dammit!

That crafty bastard, sneaking in an explosion at the very end.

Well, it hurts that I lost the queen and most of the taratect troops, but you could also say it was a small price to pay to destroy the elves' ultimate weapon.

I'll just have to tell myself it was a necessary sacrifice.

As that thought crosses my mind, my eyes fall on a sea urchin floating in

the sky.

No, not just one—tons of them.

.....Huh?

What?

Hmm?

Hmmm?

Hmmmmm?!

Wait just a minute!

Are you serious?!

Whaaat?!

There's more than one of that sea urchin thing?!

In fact, aren't there way too many of them?

At a glance, it looks like there's at least a hundred of them...

And for some reason, there appears to be a pyramid thing even bigger than the sea urchins floating in the center.

Don't tell me the sea urchins were just another mass-produced weapon...

And the real ultimate weapon is that pyramid in the middle?

First the robots, then the mega-robots, and now this...

Stop reusing the same damn twist!

ARGH!



Interlude

THE OLD MAN AND THE WITCHY LITTLE LADIES

“Loooser, looser.”

...Why in the world am I being mocked by a six-armed little lady riding on a spider, hm?

Whew. Let's calm down.

First, I suppose I should look back at how I got here.

My name is Ronandt.

I was born... Ah, no, I suppose that's going too far back.

But I ended up in this here elf forest because Prince Hugo ordered me to come.

Despite how I might seem, I am still the head mage of the imperial court, and I cannot refuse an order from the crown prince.

Even if I was less than enthused about the prospect, to say the very least...

Well, can you blame me?

Here we are in the height of the war against the demons, and suddenly we're declaring war on the elves and heading out on the offensive. It makes no sense whatsoever.

There has to be something going on behind the scenes.

But knowing that doesn't mean I can do a single thing about it by myself.

Folks may call me the strongest mage in all of humanity, but there is still much I'm incapable of.

Which is why I am being forced to throw myself into this battle against the elves, as ordered...

But that was all well and good at first.

I was put in charge of a separate troop from Prince Hugo and instructed to proceed on a different route.

Obviously, I took advantage of that situation to put on a show of proceeding slowly and carefully, delaying the march as much as possible.

It simply seemed beyond foolish to put my life on the line for such a senseless battle.

But once we made contact with the enemy, of course we had to fight, and I will admit that a part of me did always want to try fighting the elves one day.

After all, the legends say that elves excel at magic above all else.

I may be the strongest mage in all humanity, but folks still often compared me to the elves, wondering whether their strongest mage would be stronger than me.

Unfortunately, I haven't the slightest idea who the strongest elf mage is, and elves rarely use magic in front of humans at all, leaving me with no way to truly compare.

Will my magical prowess make any headway against the elves?

I must confess, I was always curious.

...But I never expected that I would be the one with the overpowering advantage.

Elves excel at magic, my foot.

They can't even deal with my magic sniping properly!

Hell, my apprentices could do better than this.

Disappointed in the baseless rumors, I foolishly proceeded to take out my anger on all the elf soldiers I could find.

Next thing I knew, we'd gotten ahead of Prince Hugo's battalion.

Dear me, how very careless!

If only I had known where that carelessness would lead...

The elves may have been a letdown, but then I found a strange, gigantic metal golem of sorts blocking my path.

Golems are humanoid monsters made of earth and stone, but what stood in front of me was more like metal armor.

I compare it to a golem for lack of any better description, but it was clearly something else entirely.

Since it was inside the limits of where the elves' barrier stood, it must have been a creature that worked for the elves, not a wild monster.

It was when I tried to Appraise it that everything changed.

<Cannot Be Appraised>

“All units, retreat!”

The second I saw that result, I gave the order to withdraw.

In all my life, there have been very few creatures that I could not Appraise.

Indeed, with the Appraisal skill at level 10, it was strange that there was anything at all that could resist my Appraisal.

I suppose that is why when I cannot Appraise something, I must assume that it is far stronger than anything I can handle.

And as if to confirm my fears, the metallic golem pointed a strange pipe-like shape in my direction and fired something.

I was only able to dodge it in time because I was already on highest alert.

Even then, the shock wave still threw me aside.

But the soldiers directly behind me were not so lucky.

They were blown away, blood spraying everywhere.

It looked as if they had literally blown up.

Their limbs flew in every direction, holes gouged through their torsos.

Each time one of these mysterious objects that I couldn't even see flew past, more of my subordinates died horrible deaths.

I immediately fired magic at the metal golem.

Without holding back at all.

But the metal golem easily dodged my flame arrow.

Hrm. Just as I feared.

Sure enough, the metal golem was too powerful to defeat by any ordinary means.

I was the only one of us who stood a chance.

I would just have to bring up the rear and buy my soldiers time to escape, it would seem.

I constructed a spell.

Throughout my life, I had polished my magic fundamentals to the best of my ability, especially after encountering that master.

These fundamentals also served as a secret technique.
I created ten arrows of flame.
Each one flew at full speed, completely under my control.
But the metal golem evaded more than half of them.
And even those that hit didn't appear to deal much damage at all.
It likely had high defense, true to its armor-like appearance.
It had high-speed mobility, too, and those mysterious long-distance attacks.

Whatever it was, it was strong.
Strong enough to remind me of the earth dragons in the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

A shiver ran down my spine.
But by bathing it in magic, I had at least bought a small amount of time.
My surviving subordinates had all started to run away.
But with this metal golem's speed, it would be all too easy to catch up.
Just buying time would not be enough.
I had to take out a single leg at least, even if it cost my life.
I teleported, landing behind the metallic golem.
Immediately, I wove magic.
It froze the golem's foot.
Then I used Wind Magic for a follow-up strike.
The frozen metallic foot cracked halfway.
Only halfway.
But even so, halfway.
That should've brought down its mobility a fair amount.
The metal golem swung its arm back in a direction that defied how any joints should naturally function.

I froze for only a second, then dove to one side.
This creature was no proper living being, so of course it could move its joints however it wished.

But I didn't understand that until I saw it for myself.
And the cost was my right arm and both legs.
I didn't dodge in time.
But I wouldn't go down without a fight.
Grimacing through the pain, I constructed another spell.
I managed to complete it before the metal golem could point its strange

pipe at me again.

Inferno Magic level 4: Heat Haze.

A small ball of flame forms, no bigger than my fist.

It struck the metallic golem's body.

The effect only lasted an instant.

But in that instant, the flame consumed everything.

Heat Haze is a spell that compresses the power of a massive blaze into a small flame.

Fire-related magic is my specialty, and this was the strongest fire spell I could use.

Even the metal golem could not stand up to Heat Haze: its sturdy frame burned up, melted, and was utterly destroyed.

Got you.

I smirked, but the expression faded a moment later.

Not far away, I could see several more of the same metal golem approaching.

...I suppose this is where it ends for me, then.

Just as I began to give up hope, four shadows swooped down and attacked the metal golems.

They destroyed all the golems in a matter of seconds.

Then one of them turned in my direction.

Much to my surprise, it turned out to be a little girl riding a spider.

"Loooser, looser."

And then she began mocking me...

Hmmm.

No, it still makes no sense even if I go over it from the beginning!

I assume those metal golems must be monsters or something that work for the elves in some fashion, but then what in the world are these little girls?

Based on the fact that they have six arms, I assume they are not human.

Experimentally, I use Appraisal on the girl directly in front of me.

The result informs me that they are a species called puppet taratects.

So, just as I thought, they are monsters.

Taratects are a famous race of spider monsters.

That makes sense, given that they are riding giant spiders as mounts.

But stranger still is the fact that this little girl has a name: Fiel.

Named Monsters...

They are said to be incredibly rare creatures that serve the mightiest of monsters.

After all, since they have a name, it must have been given to them by a superior being.

But this Fiel has stats that are several times higher than the earth dragon I once faced, and on which I couldn't make a single scratch.

Those metal golems seemed just as strong as said earth dragon, and this "Fiel" creature is clearly far stronger.

And such a powerful monster serves an even greater being?

How horrifically strong must that monster be...?

Only one creature comes to mind.

The legendary spider monster known as the Nightmare of the Labyrinth, which once showed me how truly ignorant I was of the world.

And these are spider-related monsters, too.

It is too strange to be a coincidence.

Could it be true...?

This "Fiel" character is staring at me.

Her eyes are oddly cold and inorganic, impossible to read.

She may have destroyed those metal golems, but there is no guarantee that she's an ally.

Indeed, I have already used Appraisal on her, which could be taken as a hostile act.

I would have no right to complain if she cut me down on the spot.

...Even if she is the one who insulted me first.

As I wait with bated breath, another one of the little girls smacks this "Fiel" on the shoulder.

Then she shakes her head.

...Though she didn't say anything out loud, that clearly seemed like a scolding, "don't say that, even if it's true..." type of gesture.

"...Geezer?"

After the other girl's intervention, Fiel appears to have amended my title.

It's certainly much milder than "loooser," but isn't that still just her

appraisal based on my appearance?

“Loooser... geeezer... Loo-gee!”

“You combined them?! Isn’t that even worse?!”

...Oh dear. My old heart is about to break here.

Why am I being mocked by a little girl I’ve just met, even if she is actually a monster, and being consoled with an even worse mockery?

Whatever have I done to deserve this?

Just then, the trees part, and even more of the metal golems from before appear.

“Nngh!”

I immediately get to my feet.

I’ve been using Healing Magic all this time to cure the wounds I sustained before.

I could hardly even take a single metal golem on my own, but I refuse to die lying on the ground.

I do have my pride, you know!

“Loo-gee...”

...The “Fiel” girl speaks to me in a tone that seems to say “don’t push yourself.”

“Aaargh! I am not a ‘loo-gee,’ confound iiiit!”

Like I said, I do have my pride!!

I construct a spell.

Inferno Magic level 1: Scorched Earth!

It’s a wide-ranged attack spell that covers the ground in flames.

Still, while its area of effect is larger, it’s not nearly as powerful as the level 4 spell Heat Haze.

It won’t be enough to deal a fatal blow to the golems.

But I’m just getting started!

Next I put together my second spell!

This time it’s Hoarfrost Magic level 1: Frozen Earth!

This one’s a wide-ranged attack spell that freezes over the earth.

What happens if you suddenly heat up a bunch of metal golems with Inferno Magic, then hit them with Hoarfrost Magic that drops the temperature in the opposite direction?

When something gets superheated and then immediately supercooled, it becomes incredibly fragile.

They withstood the Scorched Earth, but they couldn't handle the Frozen Earth immediately after.

Cracks begin to form in the robots' armor, and they fall apart.

"Hyooo-ho-ho-sho! How was that?! Did you see that?!"

I puff up my chest at the little girls.

To be honest, using magic of this level twice in a row is difficult even for me; my head throbs with the pain of being pushed to the limit, and the sudden loss of MP leaves me dizzy.

But sometimes a man has to be proud!

"Oooh!"

Fiel applauds with her six arms.

Heh. Looks like I proved that I'm not a looser after all.

"Loo-gee!"

"I told you, I am not a 'loo-gee'! I'll have you know that I have a very fine name. It's Ronandt!"

The other three girls watch me interacting with the "Fiel" girl.

Under their gaze, I get the creeping feeling that I am not being particularly mature.

But I forget all about that shame when Fiel starts teasing me again.

"Loooser?"

"Why are you going back to that now?!"

To make matters worse, even more metal golems start approaching, possibly attracted by my yelling.

The little ladies prepare their weapons to fight the golems.

It's as if they've already forgotten I exist.

Now, I scarcely have any MP left after that showy battle.

It would be difficult to take on any more golems.

If these other girls are as strong as this "Fiel" child, they should be able to fight off the metal golems without my help.

But can I really give up now?

Should I shamelessly back down after being called a "looser"?

"Yaargh! Just you watch! I'll show you who's the looser!"

I have my pride, I tell you!!

Even if I cannot use such big moves any longer, I can at least support these little girls!

I'll prove to them that I am no loser!

...Hrmm? What did I come here for again?



THE LORD, ALONE

“...I need to talk to Sariel.”

That day, Gülie visited with a deadly serious expression.

Thinking back, this was the day our peaceful lives fell apart.

“...Maybe he’s finally going to confess?”

“It didn’t really seem like he was in that kind of mood to me...”

An excited girl with slightly pointed ears was conversing with a green-skinned boy, who was gazing anxiously at the room where Lady Sariel and Gülie were privately conversing.

I still don’t know what was said in there, as we couldn’t hear them from outside the door.

But I think I can guess what it was about.

Because even as the two of them were talking, the news suddenly hit.

“We interrupt this program to bring a breaking news bulletin.”

A voice came from the TV, which had been left on.

“The dragons have attacked.”

The newscaster sounded flustered as he read the news.

It was too short of a report, too lacking in information to be a proper news bulletin.

But that was only a temporary problem, for as soon as the live footage came on a moment later, all of that information was filled in.

It was enough to tell at a single glance exactly what was happening.

Whether we wanted to or not.

The footage was rough and jittery, possibly taken on a cell phone.

It showed the remains of what had been a large city.

The buildings were falling apart, cars flew through the air like fluttering leaves, and elevated highways had toppled over.

Amid all the destruction, the people were too small to even be seen.

But what was painfully visible, flying in the sky, trampling the ground, was the forces of dragons.

Then the footage suddenly quaked wildly and was abruptly cut off.

“It can’t be...”

As we stared in rapt horror at the screen, Gülie came up behind us and froze.

Lady Sariel was next to him, too.

Without a word, she turned and walked to the door.

“Sariel! Where are you going...?”

“I must.”

It was a short exchange.

And yet it seemed to be enough for Gülie to figure out exactly where Lady Sariel was going.

At the time, I was still in too much shock from the footage on the TV to fully understand what was happening, or the meaning of Gülie and Lady Sariel’s exchange.

The images seemed far too removed from reality for me to fully accept that it was actually happening.

“Sari—”

“Please do not try to stop me. I do not wish to consider you an enemy.”

“.....”

Gülie’s hand was reaching toward Lady Sariel, but it froze at her response.

Just like that, Lady Sariel walked out of the orphanage.

“...She doesn’t think that I would take hostages? Does she really...trust me that much?”

Gülie sank into a chair, his shoulders sagging.

The tense news report continued playing out on the TV screen.

Lady Sariel did not come back.

Every TV channel was showing nothing but news, reporting on the dragons.

Even the news media couldn’t seem to get complete coverage; the information was complicated, and it was difficult to tell what was true.

The live footage from the beginning was all they seemed to have from the site of the attack, which they only got because there happened to be a reporter on the scene.

The whereabouts of that reporter were unknown.

Given the situation, the chances of survival were low.

Gülie stayed at the orphanage from that day on.

At the time, I didn't quite understand why Gülie was spending the night there.

But in retrospect, I suspect he may have been trying to be of use to Sariel.

By protecting the orphanage, which was so precious to her.

That must have been an act of betrayal to the dragons.

I'm sure it was a serious decision for Gülie, but he was gentle with us, trying to distract us from our worries as we waited for Lady Sariel to return.

A day, two days, a week, a month...

We awaited Lady Sariel's return.

All of the other kids from the orphanage came back.

Even the boy who had become an idol insisted on taking a break and came home.

"This is no time for entertainment. There's hardly any business anyway, so it was easy to get time off."

I don't know how much of that was true, but it was clear that he came back to the orphanage because he was worried about us.

Still, all we could do was hope and pray for Lady Sariel's safe return.

But...

Lady Sariel never came back to the orphanage...

Not long after, the dragons ceased their attack.

I only learned from the news that Lady Sariel had fought against the dragons and drove them off.

There was footage of their battle on the news, though I don't know how it was recorded.

That short video was the only recording, but it was shown on the news over and over, with the commentators praising Lady Sariel.

Some people questioned whether the footage was doctored, but either

way, the fact remained that the insurmountable threat of the dragons had been driven off, and certainly not by humans.

Many governments also officially recognized Lady Sariel's achievements, which further lessened the *number* of dissenters.

But the relief of having escaped the wrath of the dragons did not last long.

For around the same time that their attacks relented, extreme weather phenomena began occurring all over the world.

I don't know if "extreme weather" is the correct way to describe it, since the changes were too extreme to be summarized with such a simple phrase.

The ground cracked open, oceans began to dry up, and the sky lost its blueness.

It was as if the world was ending.

And indeed, that really was the beginning of the end.

"President Dustin of Daztrudia is about to begin a press conference. We will now cut to a live broadcast from the scene."

"Good morning, citizens. Without further ado, let us first discuss what information we have gathered about the attack by the dragons. The nations and territories attacked cover such a wide range that it would take far too long to name them all at this time. Our nation's troops have been dispatched to the sites of the attacks, but we still do not have a full grasp of the total casualties. We also attempted to scout the dragons' territory to assess their strength, but the dragons were nowhere to be seen. My subordinates are currently investigating where they have disappeared to; however, there have been eyewitness reports on site of lights disappearing into the distant skies. Our current theory is that the dragons have taken off into silence."

"Silence, please! As for the reason the dragons attacked, it is safe to assume that it is because we did not heed their repeated warnings regarding the use of MA energy. The dragons consistently informed us that MA energy is the life force of the planet on which we live, and squeezing it out would weaken the planet. Thus, they asked us many times to stop using MA energy, but as we all know, many nations refused and continued to endorse its use."

"Silence! I am not trying to place the blame on any specific nation! I am

simply sharing the information we know! Yes, it's true! The reason for these abnormalities that have occurred since the dragons left is that the planet is weakening... No, it is heading toward destruction!"

The rest of President Dustin of Daztrudia's press conference fell into chaos.

People shouted and jeered, and some reporters even tried to push closer to the president to hound him for answers, leading the security guards to hold them back, and turning the press conference room into a riot.

The footage ended abruptly with a shot of the president being escorted out by his security guards.

I imagine most people could not accept what he said at that press conference.

After all, many nations were already completely dependent on MA energy.

There were some exceptions like President Dustin's nation of Daztrudia, but even they could not completely control the illicit use of MA energy within their borders.

Not to mention that those nations that forbade the use of MA energy still could not stop trading with those that did use it.

The products they imported were manufactured using MA energy.

In other words, every nation benefited from MA energy in some way or another.

Our orphanage too was built in Daztrudia, where the use of MA energy was forbidden, but I'm sure we still benefited from it in some small way from imported products and such.

The dragons hadn't suddenly turned violent.

It was humanity's fault all along.

But there were few humans who were willing to admit that.

Other nations held press conferences specifically to assert that President Dustin's claims were nonsense, or to try to place the blame on other nations or the dragons in general.

But whether they admitted it or not, they couldn't stop the world from heading toward destruction.

Even as people tried to ignore reality or point fingers at one another, the end of the world was growing closer by the second.

The world grew less safe.

No, I suppose that's putting it lightly.

As they realized the world was going to end, most people's actions took a drastic turn.

Many of them decided to use what little time they had left doing whatever they pleased, and the world essentially became lawless.

Riots, injuries, thefts, suicides...

Even the police, who were supposed to prevent such things, were often found participating in the chaos instead.

It wasn't exactly quiet around the orphanage, either.

When something bad is happening, evidently it's human nature to want to blame it on someone else and take it out on them.

And as it turned out, the chimeras of the orphanage were seen as the perfect targets.

"It's all because of them!" "If it weren't for those freaks..."

There was no real logic behind it.

It was just that we were different from them, and that was reason enough to consider us unlucky, and justify violence against us.

Fortunately, we didn't have huge throngs of people forming a violent mob to come after us.

But people did throw rocks at us, or even shoot at us, on several occasions.

I imagine they didn't attack us directly because they were still somewhat afraid of us chimeras, and because of the existence of Lady Sariel.

It was well-known that Lady Sariel had driven away the dragons, and everyone who lived nearby was aware that Lady Sariel managed the orphanage, too.

So the good people who were grateful to Lady Sariel would never think of laying a hand on the orphanage.

I suppose the fact that we were shot at anyway is proof that not all people in the world are good.

Normally, we would depend on Gülie to defend us at such times, but unfortunately he disappeared not long after the news broke that Lady Sariel had stopped the dragons' attack.

At the time, I sulked that he wasn't there when we needed him most, but later I learned that he was desperately trying to save Lady Sariel then.

There is far too much that I only learned after the fact.

Back then, I was always so powerless, so ignorant, nothing more than baggage...

At any rate, we couldn't depend on Gülie to save us.

We holed up in the orphanage and managed to survive, but we did discuss strategies for the worst-case scenario.

Our intention was only to try to escape, not to fight anyone.

Aside from a few exceptions like me, most chimeras are very powerful.

Even if our opponents were armed, we were fairly confident that we could still charge head-on and escape intact.

We even had a large vehicle that could fit everyone, which one of our number drove in when they returned after the dragon attacks.

I had scoffed at the time, wondering why they would bring such a ridiculous vehicle, but maybe they'd anticipated that something like this might happen.

In other words, they had foresight that I lacked.

I still remember feeling embarrassed for how I'd scoffed at it before.

Those oddly tension-filled days continued for a while.

We had no idea when something might explode.

It could be one of the nearby residents, or one of us, or perhaps even the world itself would be the first to go.

But something else changed instead.

"We're going to go see Lady Sariel."

One of the orphanage residents, a boy who was almost as sickly as me, suddenly made that declaration.

He was physically incapable of sleep, which meant that there were permanent dark circles hanging under his eyes, and a general lack of energy about him.

But something unusual was secreted in his brain, and he could never settle down unless he was doing something.

Although he constantly declared that he didn't want to do anything, by nature he always had to be doing something.

He was usually holed up in his room doing some kind of activity, so it was unusual for him to say he was going out.

In fact, this might have been the first time.

Normally his eyes looked glazed over, but this time they were blazing

bright.

The others seemed to be just as taken aback by this as I was, and soon, we all loaded into the big car and headed out.

Since time was of the essence, he said he would explain on the way.

We planned to use the car to escape if the time came, but no one attacked as we drove away.

There was plenty of time to talk on the journey.

Daztrudia was an entire continent functioning together as one nation.

It was enormous, and took a long time to travel across, which meant we had all the more time for talking.

But in fact, very little of that time was spent on the explanation.

All he told us on the way was simply, "Lady Sariel is trying to sacrifice herself to get the world out of this situation."

Of course, he also explained her actions and reasons, how she intended to accomplish this, and so on, but that wasn't important to the rest of us.

When we heard that Lady Sariel wanted to sacrifice herself, that was all we needed to know.

We hardly even questioned how he knew all this.

He was always up to something strange in his room, so we just assumed he'd acquired this information through some dubious means as an extension of that.

But while little time was spent on the explanation, the conversation that took place within the car afterward was very long indeed.

"We have to stop Lady Sariel."

"And then what would we do?"

We all felt the same way on an emotional level.

We didn't want Lady Sariel to sacrifice herself.

But if she didn't, the world would end.

"What, so you want to sacrifice Lady Sariel so you can keep living your precious life?!"

"Of course not! But Lady Sariel chose this path herself, didn't she?! What right do we have to stop her, huh?!"

It was pandemonium.

I had already accepted that I wouldn't live for much longer.

My death might come a little sooner than expected, but I was prepared for that.

...If it were just me, that is.

I didn't care if I died.

But if everyone else from the orphanage was going to die, too?

Even if there was a way to prevent that?

I wanted the others to live.

And when I considered that Lady Sariel might feel the same way, well, it didn't seem right to stop her...

But it was still hard to accept the idea of her sacrificing herself because of that...

I think the others all had similar thoughts to mine, too.

In the end, there was no right answer.

So opinions clashed, with none being in the wrong, unable to meet in the middle...

"Enough already, you kids! Stop throwing pathetic little tantrums!"

The director put a stop to all this with a single shout.

"What good is babbling at one another about it going to do? No matter what you kids say, it all comes down to Lady Sariel's decision. If you've got something to say to her, you better go say it to her face!"

She was right, of course.

In the end, we were still just powerless kids, and none of our arguments could make a bit of difference.

The director's rebuke stopped the fighting, and for a while after that, the car was almost eerily silent.

But there was still a long way left to travel. Eventually, we couldn't help talking quietly among ourselves.

From incoherent rambling to deep discussions about the future, I feel certain that we talked about many things, but I can't remember any of the specifics.

Most likely, it's because my mind was churning with too many thoughts to fully pay attention.

I don't remember the details of those thoughts, either.

Perhaps that's only natural since I couldn't make sense of any of it myself.

But there is just one thought that I remember quite clearly.

Namely, that I had to give Lady Sariel the handkerchief when I saw her.

A variety of issues had delayed the completion of my embroidered

handkerchiefs, but I finally managed to finish one for every member of the orphanage.

I didn't know what would happen after this, but I had a feeling that either way, I needed to give Lady Sariel the handkerchief this time or I would never get the chance again.

And that premonition proved all too accurate.

Finally, we arrived at what was essentially the center of the Daztrudian government: the executive office.

Somehow, we were allowed in easily, even though ordinary citizens are banned from entering.

I still don't know how we managed to get permission, even now.

But we didn't question it at the time, since it meant we could meet with Lady Sariel as we hoped.

Yes, we successfully saw Lady Sariel.

"I am glad you all seem to be in good health."

That was the first thing she said to us after all this time.

It was a slightly off-the-mark statement, completely oblivious to how much we had worried, and utterly typical of Lady Sariel.

After that, we spoke with her for as long as time would allow.

We tried to convince her to rethink her decision.

But Lady Sariel's position was firm.

"It is part of my mission."

In the end, we couldn't change her mind at all. No matter what we said, she always shot us down with that same statement.

When we realized there would be no talking her out of it, the conversation naturally shifted toward reminiscing instead.

The nights right after she took us in, when we couldn't sleep and all gathered together to get Lady Sariel to read us stories.

The way that when a child was struck with terrifying flashbacks to the trauma of Potimas's experiments, Lady Sariel would hold them and gently stroke their head for as long as it took until the shaking subsided.

The days when Lady Sariel would teach our classes because we couldn't go to school.

That dinner when a kid was served a food they hated and tried to push it

off onto the child next to them, only to be caught by Lady Sarel and have the food shoved into their mouth as she informed them, “It is not good to be a picky eater.” (Incidentally, that just made the child in question hate that food even more.)

Then there was the time when flipping girls’ skirts was a popular pastime among the boys, until Lady Sarel confiscated all the boys’ pants and forced them to spend the day in their underwear. There was no more skirt-flipping after that.

Around the period when we were growing out of our early childhood and entering puberty, Lady Sarel made us watch adult videos in the name of health education without an ounce of shame. As she blandly explained the nature of sexual relationships, the director burst into the classroom, yelling, “What are you showing these kids?!” Lady Sarel was subjected to a lengthy lecture of her own after that.

Since none of us knew when we were born, we all celebrated the day the orphanage was opened as our birthdays. Each year, the entire day was a lavish party. Lady Sarel gave every single child a present.

When we needed advice about romance and such, we went to the director, not Lady Sarel. After all, Lady Sarel was of little help when it came to matters of the heart. But she still always seemed a little sulky when she wasn’t consulted about these things.

We all had plenty of good memories, difficult memories, and embarrassing memories.

But we never ran out of memories to talk about.

Lady Sarel had always been a part of our lives.

She was the person who saved us from Potimas’s experiments and made us from test subjects into real humans.

For all of us, talking about our memories of Lady Sarel was virtually the same thing as talking about our entire lives.

So of course we didn’t run out of things to talk about.

“...It is almost time.”

Just like that, we were out of time.

The time had come to say goodbye.

“Lady Sarel, here.”

As this would be my last chance, I gave out the handkerchiefs I made.

First, to Lady Sarel, then to everyone else from the orphanage.

I thought that if she knew everyone had the handkerchiefs I gave them, then she would feel we were always by her side.

I still don't know if my feelings got through to her.

Lady Sariel was always a little clueless about people's feelings.

But I still want to believe that she understood...

"All of you. Please, live happy lives. Happy, but peaceful."

Those were Lady Sariel's last words to us.

But how can we be happy if you're no longer here?

I'm sure I'm not the only one who had that thought.

But Lady Sariel left, without looking back.

Once she was completely out of sight, and we were alone, we started crying.

Maybe I was the first one to burst into tears, or maybe it was someone else.

We all sobbed like children, to the point where it was impossible to tell who started first.

Either way, we just kept on crying.

"Humans. Can you hear me?"

As we continued crying, a voice suddenly spoke directly in our heads.

It was the familiar voice of Gülie.

"My name is Güliedistodiez. As some of you may have noticed, as of this very moment, the world has changed."

We were all sobbing to the point where we were barely aware of what was happening, but unbeknownst to us, the entire world had just been altered.

"From now on, this planet will be managed by the new system. And I will be an administrator of that system."

Yes, in that moment, the system was constructed.

"As you all know, this planet is at the end of its life due to the foolish behavior of humans."

But at the time, we had no way of knowing what exactly that meant.

"You are attempting to sacrifice Sariel to restore the planet to life. In other words, the plan is to resolve the problem you yourselves caused by sacrificing someone else."

While we were traveling in the car, we had no access to the news, but evidently President Dustin had announced that they would be sacrificing Lady Sariel to save the planet.

And that very day was when this plan was put into action.

I only learned later that President Dustin took care to avoid our seeing Lady Sariel's final moments.

Evidently, he questioned whether to allow us to stay by her side, but ultimately determined it would be too cruel to allow us children to witness the death of our parental figure.

"Do you not think that humans should be the ones to atone for their own crimes?"

At the time, we had no way of knowing any of that information, nor any idea why we were hearing Gülie's voice in our heads.

"So we have decided to give you humans a chance. The system that will overrule this planet is a means to that end."

But as we listened to Gülie's explanation, the reason became clear.

"We will have you humans fight. By doing so, you can now increase the energy of your souls. You will become machines for fighting, winning, and gaining energy. And when you die, we will recover the energy you have earned, and assign that energy to heal the planet."

That was the explanation of how the system works.

"However, that alone would end once you have died. So as long as you are within this system, we have made it so that you will be reborn here on this planet. After you die, you will eventually live again, and you will fight and accumulate energy once more."

Fight, die, be reborn, fight, and die again...

Exhausted from crying, we could scarcely wrap our minds around this hellish system.

"Right now, this planet is being kept from destruction by Sariel's power. You attempted to sacrifice Sariel, but now you must save her. You yourselves will carry out the role you attempted to force upon her. Simple, is it not?"

But the command to "save Sariel" stuck out in our minds.

There was a way to save Lady Sariel.

That was like a beacon of hope to us.

"This is your sin, humans. Atone. Atone. Atone. Atone. Atone. Atone. Atone. Atone. Atone. Atone."

To humanity, that voice must have been a painful reminder of their sins, one that made them want to cover their ears.

“Fight. Fight. Fight. Fight. Fight. Fight. Fight. Fight. Fight. Fight. And then die.”

But to us, it was like a song of salvation.

From that day forward, our fight began.

The fight to save Lady Sariel.

A very, very long fight.

...It has been a long, long, terribly cruel fight indeed.

“Ah!”

Suddenly, my eyes flash open.

I lost consciousness for a moment there.

...Oops, that's not good.

Did my life just flash before my eyes?

“Whoa?! That was close!”

Just as I regain consciousness, I avoid an attack flying toward me.

That was far too close.

I almost went from flashback mode straight into death.

But I can't die. Not yet.

I take a quick backstep to put distance between myself and my opponent.

Luckily, my opponent doesn't try to chase me.

Once I'm at a safe distance, I catch my breath.

Touching my head lightly, I feel something wet and sticky.

A fair amount of blood is trickling from my head.

I focus on it, and begin healing that wound.

This must be why I passed out for a second there.

Then I focus on my enemy again.

It's a simple, humanoid hunk of metal.

It would almost look like an overly simplified, life-size, ball-jointed doll, if it weren't for the fact that its arms both end in drills.

Frankly, at a glance, it sure doesn't look like Potimas's ultimate weapon.

But that's exactly what it is.

Gloria, Type Ω.

That's apparently this thing's name.

Potimas made a point of telling me before the fight.

This "Omega" thing abruptly vanishes.

I shouldn't have taken my eyes off it.

In fact, I swear I've been focusing on it without even blinking.

Yet I've somehow lost sight of the thing.

Instantly, I trust my instincts and dive to one side.

A moment later, my instincts are proven spot-on, as the Omega's drill comes flying in from the opposite direction.

If I'd dodged even a nanosecond later, I would've been on the receiving end of that drill.

My heart threatens to pound out of my chest.

"You bastard!"

I swing my leg to hit it with a counterattack, but my kick slices through thin air.

By the time I moved to strike, the Omega was already out of my attack range.

"...Not bad."

In spite of myself, I mutter something that sounds too much like an admission of defeat.

But I can't help it—I have to acknowledge it.

How long has it been since something moved faster than *my* eyes could follow?

It's not that I underestimated it because of its appearance.

...Okay, I can't say that I didn't at least consider it, but Potimas did bother to tell me its name and all.

So I knew it wasn't an enemy I could take lightly.

And yet, the Omega's first attack moved faster than I could follow, and hit me squarely in the head.

Then I had to watch my whole damn life flash before my eyes...

The Omega's speed is abnormal, to say the least.

It's probably on the same level as me at my best, or maybe even faster.

I'm not saying that to be a sore loser or anything.

But unfortunately, right now, I'm a whole lot weaker than I should be.

It's that damn anti-technique barrier.

Potimas's special barrier is stretched over this whole area.

Obviously, he had this Omega here lying in wait for me.

Of course it was a trap.

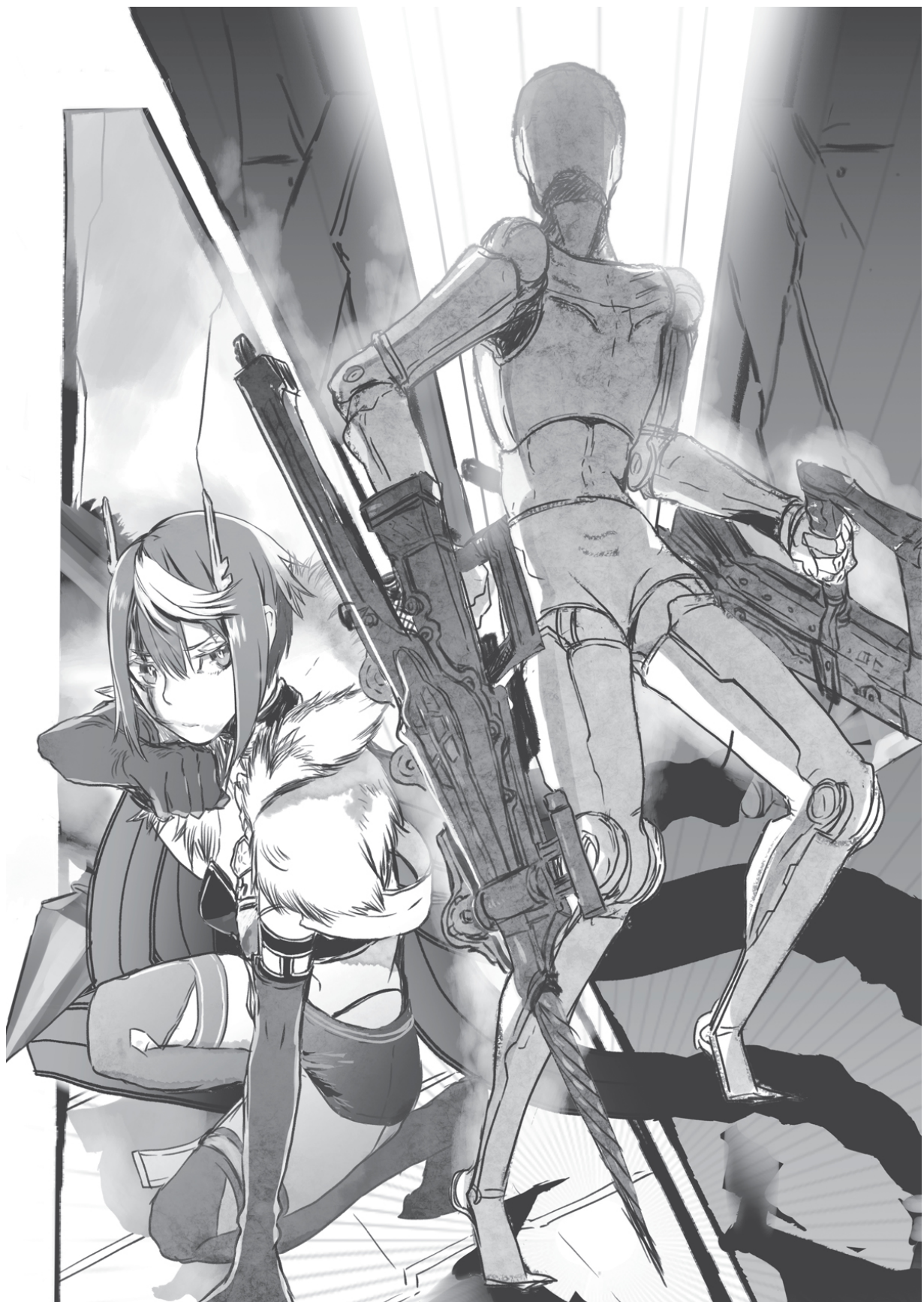
This is Potimas's kill zone, and I walked right into it.

But I knew that going in, of course.

I don't just want to defeat Potimas.

I want to crush all of his forces, traps and ultimate weapons alike, and plunge him into despair before he dies.

That's why I jumped right in knowing full well that this was a trap, but I kind of regret that now.





This Omega thing is easily as strong as I am in my prime, if not stronger. I'm totally confident that I could crush most enemies even within the anti-technique barrier, but this one might be a tall order.

It looks like it'd be weak, but it's crazy powerful.

...No, I guess that's not right.

Its simple appearance is because it's pared away anything that isn't absolutely necessary.

This thing has been built with performance as the sole deciding factor, nothing as mundane as whether it looks cool or not.

It's a masterpiece by a man who normally seems like the type to worry about aesthetics, focused solely on power.

No wonder it's so strong.

Knowing that, I alter my approach.

This isn't a challenge I can take on half-assed.

Yes, I'll admit it's a challenge.

I'm the weaker one here.

I have to fight it with that perspective in mind.

Really, how long has it been since I fought something that was out of my league?

I honestly can't remember.

So much time has passed since I was at a disadvantage in a fight that I can't even tell you when it last happened.

And to think I used to be so weak and powerless back then.

But I'm not that powerless little kid anymore!

I step forward with renewed resolve.

It'd be bad news to let the Omega set the pace with its crazy speed.

Because of the anti-technique barrier, the only abilities that will function are the ones that activate inside my body.

That means skills that activate outside my body, like long-distance attacks, won't work at all.

I can't use magic or thread.

So my only remaining option is close physical combat.

Basically, if I want to negate the Omega's speed advantage and stand a fighting chance despite the barrier, I've got to stick close to it.

"Hiyah!"

I throw a punch at the Omega, which is crouched and waiting for me.

The Omega dodges my punch easily, swirling to the side.

But I saw that coming.

I follow after it with a volley of rapid punches.

It's a nonstop barrage, too quick for the Omega to counter!

But it sees through all that, too, lunges toward my side when my guard is down for a fraction of a second, and drives its drill into my stomach.

"Nngh?!"

The drill blade spins, paring away my flesh.

I know I have to stay close, but in this case I have no choice but to back off.

I jump away to escape from the drill.

Owww... I guess Suffering Nullification isn't working because of the anti-technique barrier, huh...

My breath grows ragged.

But even when I try to breathe steadily in and out, it doesn't get any less painful.

In fact, each gulp of air makes me feel even worse.

I know this wound is deep, but no, it's more than that...

This must be poison.

The system is supposed to cancel out the effects of any scientifically poisonous substance over a certain concentration, but knowing Potimas, I wouldn't be surprised if he found a way around that.

I'm in trouble now.

Poison, on top of the anti-technique barrier...?

I can't believe I'm getting screwed over by one of my own specialties...

It's taking much longer than usual to heal my stomach wound, too.

Normally, even if half my body got blown away, I'd regenerate in seconds.

But it's dangerous to fight based on how things *normally* go.

I have to be more careful than usual about avoiding getting hit.

Since I've got high resistance to most attributes, I guess I've been starting to fall out of the habit of dodging attacks...

Most things won't damage me even if they do hit, and I can usually use Gluttony to consume anything before it hits me anyway.

Even getting stronger has its negative effects...or pride, I suppose.

When you fight someone stronger than you, it makes you realize all your

weaknesses, much like I'm doing right now.

It's been a long time since I felt this way.

So maybe I should try something I wouldn't "normally" do... A little roll of the dice, for instance.

Otherwise, I don't see how I'm going to beat this thing.

The Omega charges toward me.

Head-on!

Its speed is insane, but at least I'm not going to lose sight of something that's coming straight toward me.

As the straightforward drill attack charges toward me, I brace myself and let it hit me in the chest.

"Aaaaah!"

A huge hole opens in my torso.

"Got...cha..."

But in exchange, I managed to grab the Omega's body with my left hand.

Then I clench my right hand tightly.

I'll put everything I've got into this one attack!

A critical right hook!

My full-powered punch hits the Omega square in the face, shattering its head, and blowing away its upper body with the aftershocks, too.

On top of that, even most of its lower body gets scattered by the impact.

"Well? How d'you like that?"

So much for being more careful to avoid getting hit.

But I think this was the only way take down the Omega.

If I kept staying away out of fear of getting hurt, I'd probably have been outmaneuvered by the Omega's speed and gone down without ever landing an attack of my own.

So instead I let myself get hit, caught the Omega, and brought it down in one blow.

A short, decisive battle.

This was probably the best way to conserve energy.

I'm deeply wounded, but I'll heal with time.

It probably would consume more energy to try to accelerate the injury's recovery rather than let it heal gradually over time.

"I hate to break it to you, but it's not over yet."

But just as I'm savoring a moment of victory, Potimas's voice ruthlessly interrupts.

The shattered pieces of the Omega flow together like liquid metal, and form back into its original shape in a matter of seconds.

"Round two is just beginning."

As I stare in shock, Potimas's amused voice echoes around me.

Then the Omega charges toward me again.



RUMINATE: RAGNAROK

The battle between humans and dragons had begun.

That in itself was no surprise.

Humans matter little more to dragons than garbage.

Intelligent life or not, from our perspective they are no different from any other animal.

Especially once they continued draining the planet's life force in the form of MA energy, ignoring our countless warnings.

Inevitably, dragons came to see humans as parasites that were bleeding the planet dry.

So of course they felt no hesitation about exterminating said parasites.

Perhaps it would be different if humans were under the protection of dragons, but that was not the case for the people of this planet.

Yes, there were a handful of humans who worshiped dragons, but their numbers were incredibly small compared to the total human population.

Perhaps there was some intention to offer those few worshippers salvation in the very end, but unfortunately that never came to pass.

At the time, I was only one low-ranking dragon, in no position to be privy to the thoughts of the elders.

I no longer have any way of knowing what the highest-ranking dragons intended for the future.

The only order I was given was to persuade Sariel.

Dragons could no longer overlook the humans' actions, and would have to exterminate them.

Their hope was that Sariel could tolerate those actions.

That is what I was meant to negotiate with her about.

From my point of view, there was no way that would ever succeed.

They must have chosen me for the role because I was acquainted with

her, but honestly, I was far from enthused about the notion.

Who would want to attempt a negotiation knowing it would fail?

Much less when the other party in question is one for whom I had unrequited feelings?

...It did not sit well with me, but I had no choice.

However, it is a mystery to me what the elder dragons expected.

Did they think the negotiation would succeed, or did they know, as I did, that it would fail?

I have no idea.

Theoretically, from the standpoint of an average dragon, there was reason to believe that it might be a success.

Sariel's mission was to preserve the native species.

If the humans continued to use MA energy, the planet would inevitably be destroyed.

Which would also mean the end of any native species.

In that case, it was conceivable that Sariel would agree to turn a blind eye to the dragons' actions long enough to let humans be exterminated.

Of course, that logic falls apart when one realizes that Sariel wanted to protect not just the native species, but humanity in particular.

It is possible that the dragons in power did not realize this, in which case they might have truly hoped that the negotiation would succeed.

But what if they knew from the beginning that it would fail?

That would certainly explain why the attack on humanity had already commenced while I was negotiating.

If that were the case, then my role as "negotiator" was really to buy time, to stay Sariel's hand.

I would prefer not to believe that, since it would essentially make me a sacrificial pawn...

The fact remains that the attacks began while I was mid-negotiation, but it is...theoretically possible...that they were simply overeager and assumed I would succeed...

...I must admit, that excuse sounds feeble even to my own ears.

At any rate, I will never know for sure what the elders were thinking, because I did not rejoin the dragons afterward.

Knowing the truth now would make no difference anyway.

As I expected, negotiations with Sariel broke down, and Sariel and the

dragons did battle.

That is all.

I am sure the battle was a fierce one.

I cannot say for sure, as I was not there to witness it.

But Sariel was alone, against many dragons.

A single dragon is more than enough to destroy a nation.

On the defensive, Sariel could certainly defeat an individual dragon, but in the meantime the other dragons could wipe out the nation below.

The dragons trying to destroy humanity, and Sariel chasing the dragons to destroy them...

It must have been quite a deadly game of cat and mouse.

Naturally, the battle went on for some time.

Which gave the humans enough time to start defending against us.

I am sure they did not want to go down without a fight, even if it was utterly hopeless.

Just the other day—no, I suppose it was longer than that from a human point of view...

That weapon appeared from beneath the land of the wind dragon Hyuvan, the one that was designed by Potimas and built by some nation or other.

It was made by humans to fight against us dragons.

Of course, they were unable to finish it in time to fight us in the end; even if it had been finished, it would not have been enough, anyway.

The human armies resisted the dragons' attack, of course, but that did not last for long.

But we made a miscalculation: The humans stole even more MA energy for those armies.

For making and operating their weapons...

Truly ironic, that a battle to force them to stop using MA energy would result in the use of even more MA energy.

Worse yet, Potimas was behind it, selling the plans for these weapons.

Even after he was made a wanted criminal, he was still sheltered as the leading expert on MA energy.

He must not have wanted for places to hide; I am sure there were plenty of humans who were desperate for the fruits of his research.

And even as he was in hiding, he still devoted himself to research, living

his life as he pleased.

Why did I leave him be at the time? There is little that I regret more.

When Foduey was caught up in Potimas's plot and turned into a vampire, when I grew to know the children of the orphanage and learned the depth of Potimas's sinfulness...

If only I had given in to the impulse to hunt him down and destroy him on the spot...

At any rate, I doubt things would have gotten as complicated as they have now.

I should not have rationalized that a human criminal should be judged by human hands, and other such convenient excuses.

I suppose the lesson here is that while failure is often the result of acting on one's emotions instead of listening to logic, there are times when it is best to let one's emotions decide instead.

But of course, it is inevitably easier to judge these things after the fact, and in most cases one cannot tell at the time what will be for the best.

Still, if I had known, I would have killed Potimas right away.

Even now, I dearly desire to kill him.

But that role is not for me, nor do I have the right.

Though it feels shameful, I cannot refuse to leave that duty to another.

I suppose a human criminal will be judged by human hands after all.

Although it certainly took a long time for that judgment to fall...

Well, he has certainly built up even more charges in the meantime.

I am sure any punishment will be more than acceptable—at least, I will gladly accept it.

She should savor her revenge to her heart's satisfaction.

Thinking back, there have been many sins in this world, and all have been carried by someone.

Individually, the people who live in this world have probably paid off a fair amount of their penance by now, although Ariel would be angry to hear me say so.

Still, I feel that they have been punished more than fairly.

Think of it: they have been reincarnated in this world over and over, unable to properly return to the cycle of death and rebirth, the power of their souls being squeezed dry all the while.

They themselves are not aware of it, since they do not retain their

memories from one life to the next, but it has certainly seemed a sufficient punishment from my point of view.

At this point, their souls have been worn down to the point that even reincarnating is becoming dangerous for some of them.

The wear on the souls of the demons has been especially harsh; there were already so few of them, and in spite of their long lifespans, their cycle of death is hastened by the constant war against humanity.

Perhaps that is punishment for the sin of using so much MA energy in the past in order to evolve, but when I see their race driven to the brink of extinction, I cannot help but feel that perhaps they have suffered more than enough in penance.

Even for humans, it is not as if all of them were in thrall to MA energy.

Many of them were simply caught up in this world's problems by chance.

Dustin, especially, was not originally in such a position that he should blame himself so harshly as he does.

Certainly, I still cannot accept his final decision.

But the fact remains that it was the only choice he had.

When I think of it that way, I can't help but feel that he drew the short end of the stick.

Yet in spite of that, he still continues to blame himself for drawing it as if it were of his own volition and take responsibility accordingly, which is honestly rather impressive.

Not that I would ever say this to his face.

Of course not.

Even if I do think him impressive in a way, I cannot agree with the direction of the Word of God religion.

That is another story entirely.

But I suppose I do feel a bit indebted to Dustin, and that is what prevents me from criticizing his final choice too harshly.

I feel guilty because of what my fellow dragons did, even if I did not help them do it.

That feeling is all the stronger because, unlike the humans of this world who have been atoning for their sins these many long years, the dragons did not stay to do just that.

Instead, the dragons did something truly unthinkable in the final hour.

Namely: they drew out the last drops of MA energy from this world, and ran away with it.

What would happen if they did such a thing after the humans had already spent so much MA energy?

The answer was obvious: The world would end.

This was undoubtedly the beginning of the end.

That is the real reason that the world suddenly started trending toward destruction so rapidly right after the conclusion of the battle between Sariel and the dragons.

That was exactly what the dragons were trying to do.

I am sure the humans who lived on this planet thought, How could the dragons do such a thing?!

Even I felt the same way.

But from the perspective of the dragons, it was not such a strange notion.

It might seem irrational to humans, but to the dragons it was in fact a perfectly logical conclusion.

Essentially, the dragons wrote this world off as hopeless.

Humans would not want to stay aboard a sinking ship for long, would they?

No, they would escape from the ship as soon as possible.

And if there was any valuable luggage aboard, they would take as much as they could carry.

Since the ship was sinking anyway, there would be no reason not to take it.

This is the same logic the dragons followed.

There is another reason, too: They wanted to sink it themselves, to ensure that it would never surface again.

As far as the dragons were concerned, the humans of this world were pests who drove their own planet to destruction, heedless of the many warnings they were given.

Naturally, they wanted to ensure that such vermin would not leave their planet and infest other worlds.

The dragons sought to wipe out all the pests at once so they would not have to worry about them again.

Not exactly an appealing concept to the humans being wiped out, I am

sure, but that is the truth of how dragons saw humans.

They were reluctant to use an inhabitable planet, but they could not rule the place anyway, since Sariel was already there when they arrived.

Since the planet did not belong to dragons to begin with, it was not a difficult decision to let it go.

In other words, they gave up on ruling the world and opted to destroy it instead.

Though putting it that way sounds rather harsh...

But it is not incorrect, and I do harbor resentment about this final decision of the dragons myself, so I do not care to amend it.

Yes, from the point of view of a dragon, it was the correct decision.

It had advantages for them, and no disadvantages: A planet they could not rule was destroyed, and in exchange they gained what energy that planet had left.

Cruel as it sounds, the fact that all of the humans still living there would be eradicated was also an advantage as far as the dragons were concerned, since it meant that vermin had been exterminated.

They had no pity for humans, even if they were intelligent life.

In fact, I am sure the fact that they were intelligent made it even harder for the dragons to forgive their actions.

It was as if a child who never listened to warnings finally made a foolish mistake they could not undo.

Could you blame the adults for being angry and refusing to help such a child?

...Whose side am I on, you ask?

Why, I am on Sariel's side, of course.

I am not necessarily on the side of the humans.

Before I struck out on my own, I saw humans from a dragon's perspective.

I too was angered by their foolishness.

It was the dragons who pulled the final trigger on this world's destruction, but humans are still unmistakably to blame for paving the way up to that point.

So given a choice between humans and dragons, I will indeed defend the dragons.

Though I cannot say that I am truly on the dragons' side anymore,

either...

I was indeed an unimportant dragon in the first place.

I am lost to their side now, but I will admit that I am still reluctant to speak ill of the race into which I was born.

I cannot fully forgive them for taking the MA energy and fleeing in the end, but there is a part of me that would endorse that course of action from their point of view.

Would you laugh at me for flip-flopping between sides?

...Yes, I suppose you are right.

In the end, I was never able to make a firm decision one way or another.

Even now, I am still struggling in the same way, am I not?

.....

...You could at least attempt to reassure me.

.....Fine.

My being pathetic is far from a recent development.

I know that much.

But it was still the most painful decision of a lifetime to go begging D for help.

Even now, I myself am amazed that I had the nerve to do something so drastic.

I had never actually met D in person before.

Of course not. D is far too powerful a god.

Even the dragons, who have a great deal of influence among all gods, refrain from clashing with that one.

Did not the dragons also refrain from clashing with Sariel, you ask?

Our dealings with Sariel and D were very different.

Yes, Sariel was a powerful lost angel, and the dragons were reluctant to deal with her.

But we lived in the same world and hoped we might be able to win her over to our side over a long period of time.

We were attempting to gradually encircle her, not refraining from interacting whatsoever.

But D is a different story entirely.

We would never even go near that one.

Do not touch, do not interact, and if she should ever approach you, flee without hesitation.

That was how D was described among dragons.

For such prideful creatures as us, it is rare indeed to make such a statement.

That should tell you how much dragons feared D.

In fact, discussion of D was largely considered taboo among our kind.

We were reluctant to even speak that name.

Truth be told, some of the younger dragons did not even know of D's existence.

I was one of the younger dragons myself, but I was only made aware of her because I happened to excel at spatial abilities.

These spatial abilities allow one to travel anywhere at all, which is precisely why those who can use them must be informed of the places that are forbidden to tread.

And of course, one of those places was D's abode.

The dragons boast a great deal of influence even compared to other gods, but it must be said that even then, they are not invincible.

There are many gods that will retaliate if they are offended, no matter who the offender might be.

Even the great dragon god, the highest ranking of the dragons, is said to have been injured once long ago by the god that reigns over hell.

Legend has it that the dragon god had never truly been wounded before or since.

Hm?

Have I ever met the dragon god?

Me? Of course not.

Just to be clear, this world is a very remote region by dragon standards.

Think of it as a puny village in the farthest-removed countryside of an obscure territory.

On the other hand, the dragon god is akin to a king living in the capital, understand?

Someone who was born and raised in obscurity of some far-off countryside would never get a chance to have an audience with someone of such high standing.

In this comparison, I suppose D would be the king of another kingdom.

So even though I had never met my own king, I went to the king of a foreign land to quest their aid.

It was incredibly brazen of me, to say the least.

Honestly, I am still amazed that I did such a thing.

I suppose you could say I was grasping at straws.

Although the “straw” I ended up grasping was something far more sinister...

...Was it really the right decision to turn to D for help?

I still don't know the answer to that question.

If I hadn't gone to D and convinced her to interfere in this world, Sariel would no longer be alive.

Far from it: Her very soul and existence might have disappeared entirely.

If her soul was still intact, she could at least be reborn and live out another life.

I do not know what sort of life it would be, but if she could forget everything and be happy, at least...

But if her soul was spent, that possibility would be no longer.

I wanted to save Sariel's life.

If nothing else, I wanted to at least ensure that her soul would not disappear.

That wish was granted, and the system D created kept Sariel and this world alive.

But it was not the salvation I had hoped for.

For every wish granted, there is always a price.

There was no perfect outcome where Sariel and this world could go on in peace as I wanted.

D might have been able to do that, but she had no reason to.

Things might have been different if I had been able to offer a satisfactory payment, but of course a mere whelp of a dragon like myself had no such thing to give.

Thus, in exchange for saving Sariel and this world, D made the world into her plaything.

She made game-like features such as stats and skills into reality.

The real world was turned into a game for her amusement.

That may have seemed unbearable to the humans of this world who were trapped in the game, but it was their actions that led to this consequence.

Since there was no way to save the world except to play the game, they had to do it, in order to atone as well as survive.

But I do wonder sometimes.

Did I not offer up the humans whom Sarel laid down her life to save, as a plaything for D's amusement?

And did I not force Sarel to endure constant suffering as a result?

Yes, her life was indeed preserved.

And this world continues to exist, if in a different form than before.

But in both cases, is this not simply prolonging their agony for no reason?

Have I done something completely unnecessary, or even cruel?

I cannot help but get caught up in such negative thoughts.

It is an inevitable effect of watching this world from behind the scenes for so long, unable to do anything more, I suppose.

My melancholy feelings have built up immensely over the years.

But then again, perhaps that is part of my punishment, too.



Interlude

THE PRESIDENT'S DECISION

“What is the situation?”

“There have been radical weather phenomena and other strange occurrences all over the world.”

“Violence is breaking out among citizens, including murder and other crimes.”

“Suicides have increased as well. Many of the dragon worshippers, especially, have committed mass suicide.”

“The distribution of food is at a standstill.”

Each report was as terrible as the last.

But of course that would be the case when the end of the world is drawing near.

“...And how much time do we have left?”

No one was able to answer my question immediately.

Not one of them made a sound, as if afraid to speak the answer out loud.

But eventually, someone had to break the silence.

A minister reluctantly spoke up.

“According to Potimas Harrifenas, we may have less than a year.”

Upon hearing Potimas's name, I could tell my displeasure was showing on my countenance.

I cannot place all of the blame for this situation on Potimas, but he was undoubtedly the origin of these troubles.

One man's delusions of grandeur had driven the world to destruction.

But he was also the only individual who might stand a chance of solving the very situation he created.

Thus, we could not execute Potimas, as much as it pained me.

“In addition, he stated that this is only the length of time that the planet is likely to retain its form... But the amount of time that life can survive on

it is likely even shorter.”

“If I may add, the more time passes, the worse the situation becomes.”

The implication was that if I was going to make a decision, I must do so with haste.

These men and women who had followed me all this time were resolved to abide by my decision, even in this dire situation.

In other words, they were willing to comply with my judgment as the so-called sage of the world, no matter how illogical it might be.

But while I knew I had been given the right to decide, I could not bring myself to open my mouth.

Our nation of Daztrudia was largely spared from the dragon attacks, perhaps because we forbade the use of MA energy.

While other nations suffered catastrophic damage, we were relatively unscathed.

Thus, I was now being praised and called a “sage” for resisting the allure of MA energy and continuing to condemn it, to the point where there were scarcely any nations that would defy Daztrudia.

Which is why I had to make my choice with great care.

In this situation, if Daztrudia were to say that black is white, then it would be so throughout the world.

“Hmm...”

I heaved a heavy sigh.

No matter how long and hard I thought about it, I reached the same conclusion.

As the president, as the de facto leader of humanity, I needed to make a decision even if it was a bitter pill to swallow.

“Is this truly the only way?”

I was not so much asking the others as I was confirming it to myself.

Sure enough, no one else offered up an answer.

How could they?

A long, long silence sank over the conference room.

“Tell Potimas Harrifenas to make the necessary preparations.”

“...Yes, sir!”

I said it.

There was no turning back.

That was the moment that I, President Dustin of Daztrudia, made the

decision that essentially chose the fate of humanity.

The other people in the conference room lowered their heads.

I alone stood up from my chair and walked over to the window.

Through the thick bulletproof glass, the sky seemed to have lost its light, even though it was not yet nighttime.

A dull thud filled the room.

It was the sound of me striking my forehead against the window.

“A sage? How could anyone think me a sage? I am nothing more than a shameless fool!”

As I cried out in despair, I struck my head against the window again.

And again.

Over and over.

“President! President!”

Seeing my forehead split and blood begin to trickle down, a minister rushed over to stop me.

But I still kept smashing my head against the glass.

Only when three of the ministers tore me away from the window did I finally stop injuring myself.

“Scum! I am scum!”

But my words did not stop.

I continued hurling insults at myself.

“President! President! You are an honorable man! You are not scum!”

I am sure the minister meant that from the bottom of his heart, but his words rang hollow to my ears.

“We are repaying a kindness with cruelty. How can that not be called scum?! For shame, damn it all!”

My shoulders heaved as I bellowed, until finally, I lost my strength and sank into a chair.

“My name shall be dragged through the mud forevermore.”

“Surely not...”

“No, it shall. It must. So I must create that future with my own hands.”

The ministers fell silent at this.

“From now on, I will use any means necessary to protect humanity, like the scum I am. I shall carry on until my very soul is gone. That is all I can do, shameless fool that I am.”

My eyes were bloodshot, but I spoke with conviction.

“The goddess Sarel saved humanity from the dragons. And now we will offer her as sacrifice to keep this world alive.”

At that, the ministers all hung their heads.

“We will follow you to the depths of hell, President Dustin.”

DUSTIN EAREHIGHNAM



Born of the Earehighnam family, Dustin's father, grandfather, and great-grandfather all served as previous presidents of Daztrudia. In order to distinguish him from his forefathers, he was referred to by his first name instead of his family name. A skilled decision-maker who always held true to his promises, he was a president known for his strong leadership. This determined image made him a popular figure as well. It was he who committed to the strategy of sacrificing Sariel in order to save the world, though he did so with great sorrow. Because of this, he resolved that he must protect humanity by any means necessary, no matter the cost. Even now, he continues working to fulfill that promise.





Interlude

POTIMAS AND THE GOD'S SACRIFICE

Around the time the dragons' attacks ceased, I was captured by Daztrudia.

...Although that was really only a clone of me.

Hmph. Those people truly believed they had captured the real me.

Such simpletons.

By way of the clone, I proposed a method of saving this world to President Dustin.

Namely, offering the so-called goddess Sariel as a sacrifice.

My clone is in the process of preparing the required technology.

The goddess harbors a massive amount of energy, as she was powerful enough to drive off the dragons.

We will extract it from the goddess by dismantling her and siphoning it into the world to replace the lost MA energy.

...At least, that is the theory I proposed, but of course such a method will not actually save the world.

Energy comes in many different forms.

Just as an atom may be composed of many different things, so too is there a wide range of energy.

Siphoning the goddess's energy into the planet as is will not make a substitute for MA energy.

In fact, it might even cause resistance that will hasten the world's demise.

But those idiots do not realize that.

So I will deceive them until the very end and steal away the goddess's energy, too.

The energy of a goddess... Now that will be worth studying.

I never managed to achieve eternal life with MA energy, but perhaps researching a goddess's energy will bear better fruit...

However, once I have stolen the goddess's energy, I doubt I can remain on this planet any longer.

This planet is soon to collapse at this rate, anyway.

I had hoped to remain here until I found a nearby planet I could inhabit, but it appears that will not be the case.

I shall simply have to find one while traveling in space.

Let us hope I do not encounter the dragons, who already know of me, wherever I try to put down roots.

Honestly, those dragons did me a fine turn at the very last.

I would have liked to use the MA energy they ran away with, you know.

But it is gone now, so I suppose there is nothing else for it.

I shall give up on that much, anyway.



SHOWDOWN: COUNTLESS SPIDER EYES

Innumerable sea urchins float in the air.

There's a huge pyramid hovering in the center.

At this point, I feel like this battle should be taking place in space or something.

No waaay.

Look, I'm sorry, citizens of this world.

You gave it your best shot.

Really, how could anyone expect you to save up any amount of energy when some freak keeps spending it all to make stupid crap like this float in midair?

The amount of energy he must've needed for that single sea urchin was bad enough, but with what he must've stolen to make a whole army of 'em, you definitely could've saved a world or two by now.

If anything, I'm amazed this place has lasted at all with that bastard sapping so much energy.

It just goes to show how hard the residents of this world have been fighting.

Wow, you gotta give 'em an A for effort!

...That still doesn't change what I'm gonna do, though.

But we can worry about that after this battle's over.

First, I need to deal with that floating swarm of sea urchins and the pyramid thing.

Good thing I already told Mr. Oni to give the order to retreat.

Even the queen couldn't take down one sea urchin without my help, and now there's too many to count. Escaping is the best option here.

Those sea urchins seem to specialize in wide-range attacks, too.

With this many of them in one place, they could easily raze the whole

forest to the ground.

The demon army and any other troops wouldn't be anything but targets.

Even the likes of Mr. Oni and Vampy would be out of their league against a whole swarm of these things.

This is what you'd call a "strategic retreat."

Mera's doing great on that front.

He and his army have already withstood the elves' attacks and safely retreated.

I did warn him in advance not to do anything crazy if things took a bad turn, but I'm still impressed he managed to withdraw so smoothly.

It can be tough to retreat with enemies at your back, but they still pulled it off.

In spite of everything, I think Mera might actually be the best commander out of any of us.

Meanwhile, Mr. Oni and Vampy are bringing up the rear, mowing down the elves before they retreat.

...Can you even call that a retreat anymore?

Kinda calls the definition into question if there's no more enemy to retreat from.

Other than that...uhh, looks like the puppet spiders are fighting robots alongside a familiar-looking old geezer.

What are you guys doing?

Like, seriously, what?

Do I even want to know what happened there?

...Okay, whatever.

I'll retrieve the geezer along with the puppet spiders, I guess.

I activate teleportation by way of the battle clones the puppet spiders are riding and evacuate all of them to safety with the old man in tow.

There. That's one less thing to worry about.

Now I just have to deal with this swarm of sea urchins, and the pyramid, which kinda looks like the boss.

First the robots, then the mega-robots, then the sea urchins, and now this pyramid.

Deploying your forces in separate waves is a stupid plan, but I can see why they waited to send out the sea urchins.

Their best attack is carpet-bombing with those countless gun-spikes.

Which could easily take out the robots and mega-robots down below in the process.

That's probably why they didn't jump right to the sea urchins.

Although maybe the elves just thought the robots would be plenty.

Then the robots weren't enough, so they sent in the mega-robots, and then I made quick work of those with the meteor bullets...

Yeah, maybe they were just rationing out their forces without thinking after all.

Or maybe they had no choice because the robots and mega-robots aren't exactly designed to work well alongside the sea urchins.

Okay, but either way!

This time for sure! This has GOT to be the elves' ultimate weapon!

There's no way something even crazier is gonna pop out after this! Right?!

What I'm saying is, there *better* not be anything else!

I'm sick and tired of this gag already!

It was already getting old when tons of mega-robots popped out, and then the even stronger sea urchin, and *then* tons of the sea urchins popped out, too?! Are you kidding me?!

And now there's even a showy-looking pyramid in the middle, like the cherry on top of this stupid weapon sundae!

That thing's gotta be the last trump card for sure!

It is, right?! Please, tell me there's nothing else!

I know I'm normally a mild-mannered spider, but if a whole bunch of those pyramids pop out after this, I'm seriously gonna lose it!

Argh! Aaargh!

Ahh, I feel a little better after ranting a bunch.

Seriously, come off it already...

No waaay...

Potimas, you're something else...

At this point, even I've gotta hand it to the guy.

This is pretty impressive.

Now I get why he was always so stupidly full of himself.

With this much firepower in your back pocket, yeah, of course you'd be confident that you can't lose...

I mean, anyone else would never be able to deal with this...

But *I* can deal with it, of course.

All right, guess I gotta get serious now.

Ughhh.

I really didn't want to show my whole hand here, but it looks like I have no other choice...

You should be proud of yourself, Potimas.

You made me—a literal god, at least in a roundabout way—go all out to defeat you.

Honestly, I thought this was gonna be an easier win.

As I'm preparing to get serious, the pyramid makes the first move.

One of its corners starts glowing.

Is that a w*ve motion gun?

'Cause it sure looks like a w*ve motion gun!

Just as I suspected, after a moment, the light forms a dense laser beam and fires right at me.

Yeah, yeah, into my parallel dimension it goes.

Aaand now I'll send it right back atcha!

A gate to an empty parallel dimension appears right in front of me and sucks up the laser.

Then I create another gate right next to it so that the laser comes flying back out toward the pyramid.

Any space manipulator worth her salt would think of a move like this!

The thing where you connect two portals to fire a long-distance attack back at your enemy!

The pyramid's own laser beams toward it.

But, as I probably should've guessed, the pyramid has a barrier that deflects the laser in a flash of dazzling light.

This one seems to be a combination of an anti-technique barrier with a reflector, maybe?

The laser bounces off the barrier and branches off in all directions, every scattered piece of light vaporizing whatever it hits.

...Yeesh, that thing is waaay too strong.

Seriously, what's up with that?

It totally annihilated the ground wherever it hit...

I'm not even talking craters here; they're basically just gaping holes.
Are you planning on physically destroying the planet now?

I thought it was a w*ve motion gun, but it's basically the superlaser from the D*ath Star.

How much energy must it cost just for a single shot of that thing?

Man, I'm glad I didn't try to just block that thing.

I don't think there's any way to defend against something like that.

Heh, but long-distance attacks don't work on me!

I'll just send them all flying right back where they came from!

I'm gonna sink this thing before it fires another shot, though.

First, I steal a quick peek at what Hyrince is doing.

Looks like Mr. Oni is hustling him away.

He looks back for a second, like maybe he noticed me spying on him, but then he faces forward again to focus on evacuating.

Guess he's not planning to get involved in this battle, then.

That's all well and good, but it still sucks that he's gonna see the aces up my sleeves.

I don't think I can get through this fight without going all out, though.

I mean, I could probably half-ass it given enough time, but this whole area will probably get reduced to nothing if I drag it out for too long.

Whew.

All right, here we go.

But first, I'm gonna throw myself into another dimension.

Heh.

No matter how powerful that beam attack might be, it can't hit me if I'm in another dimension entirely!

What's so unfair about spatial manipulation, you ask?

Well, it's probably the fact that you can do anything you want to any opponent who can't use spatial techniques without giving 'em any way to fight back.

Which is why gods need spatial abilities, I guess.

Although I seem to be especially good at it.

Anyway, guess it's time to take the lid off my hellish cauldron.

A crack appears in space above where the pyramid and sea urchins are floating.

It spreads out in the shape of a spiderweb, covering the air above the elf

village.

Then countless eyes peer down through the cracks.

Countless eyes, all gazing down at the earth.

It's my clones, using Gluttonous Evil Eye.

The creepy-crawly crowd of spider eyes unleashes the attack simultaneously, devouring the energy of the pyramid and the sea urchins.

The pyramid and sea urchins all unload anti-aircraft fire, but they're thwarted by the spiderweb-shaped space, preventing any attacks from reaching the clones.

Well, yeah. I used Spatial Separation on the whole setup.

Nothing's getting in there.

Their energy drained, the sea urchins drop to the ground.

That's what happens when I go all out.

I use my spatial abilities to the fullest, have countless clones hiding out in an alternate-dimension "home," and suck up all your energy with Gluttonous Evil Eye.

Without their energy, even a god is just an ordinary living thing.

Having more energy than a normal creature could possibly contain is what makes a god a god, so if you take that away, you can't even call them a god anymore.

This is the strategy I developed so that I—a newly made, half-assed god—could defeat the likes of Güli-güli.

I mean, what other choice did I have?

If we fought fair and square, I'd definitely lose.

So my only choice was to take the tried-and-true method I already had to the extreme.

Honestly, this is all I've got.

There's so little I can actually do that you can barely even call me a real god.

But with this new "holing up at home" strategy that I polished to the extreme, I could actually take down a top-tier god like Güli-güli, at least in theory.

There's no way it would fail against some stupid elf weapons.

I've got one million clones stashed in my cozy new subspace home.

So if they've got eight eyes each, that's a total of eight million Gluttonous Evil Eyes.

I can only fully operate up to ten thousand battle clones at a time, but if all I have to do is activate Gluttonous Evil Eye, I can pull all this off.

It's an incredibly simple strategy, but that's what makes it so hard to defend against.

Still, that simplicity also means there might be a method for defending against it that I haven't thought of...

Which is why I was hoping to avoid revealing this particular move...

I check in on Hyrince again.

Oh, geez. He's totally staring.

Cut it out! Don't look!

This is the only killer move I've got up my sleeve. If you figure out a way to deal with it, I'm totally screwed.

That's why I didn't want to do this!

C'mon, don't come up with a counterstrategy for this, okay?

While I'm distracted with that, the last of the sea urchins fall to the ground, finally followed by the powerless pyramid.

Just like that, the elves' ultimate weapon goes down.

Considering that the queen couldn't even put a scratch on the sea urchin alone, this pyramid must've been even stronger, probably to the point where even the Demon Lord wouldn't have been able to deal with it.

Taking into account the massive amount of energy I just sucked out of it with Gluttonous Evil Eye, I can estimate that the thing was insanely powerful.

But it still went down in a matter of minutes.

Just like Potimas confidently built up the elves' forces, I had my own power saved up that could destroy anything he threw at us.

So this victory was the obvious outcome.

...Still, I gotta admit my heart's racing a little.

I mean, c'mon!

Every time I thought that had to be it, even more reinforcements popped up, y'know?!

At this point, I wouldn't be surprised if a whole swarm of pyramids comes out next!

I mean, I'd be mad, but not surprised!

But you get why I'm paranoid at this point, right?!

Please, tell me there won't be any more!

But as if to crush my dreams, the ground splits open, and something gigantic floats into sight.

...

.....

.....

ENOUGH ALREADY, DAMMIIIIIT!!!!

That's it!

Now I'm mad!

Grr! You've gone and pissed off this mild-mannered spider for the last time!!

Arrgh! I hope you're ready to pay the price!

GRARGH! I was already gonna destroy you, but now I'm REALLY gonna pulverize you good!!

...Wait, is it just me, or is the UFO-looking thing that just popped out trying to run away?

Get back here, dammit!!



THE LORD, AVENGED

“Ariel! What the hell is that thing?!”

Potimas’s voice rings out in mounting panic.

At the same time, the vicious attacks from the Omega suddenly stop.

“Hmm? What ‘thing’? You’ll have to be more specific. I have no idea what you’re talking about...”

I shake my head and shrug my shoulders in an exaggerated, mocking gesture.

Normally, I imagine he would’ve just ignored my attitude, but he seems especially on edge right now: I can hear his teeth grinding over the speakers.

“That thing you call ‘White’! What *is* it?!”

Riiight.

Yeah, I figured as much.

I was only messing with him when I said I didn’t know what he meant.

No one but White could possibly get Potimas into such a panicky state.

He seems to be seriously freaking out, too.

When was the last time I heard him yelling with so much actual emotion? Probably that time when White literally tore him a new one...

Potimas usually looks down on other people, never showing any emotion.

He thinks he’s too superior to be affected by what any lesser beings might do.

I bet he thinks it would be disgraceful to let his feelings be moved by such creatures.

But now, he’s totally losing it.

That must mean something far beyond Potimas’s wildest imagination

must have happened.

Yeah, sounds like White's work to me.

"What's up? Did White do something wacky?"

I doubt he's going to answer me, but I might as well ask.

"I'm the one asking the questions here! Just hurry up and tell me what it is!"

At this point, he's basically shrieking.

Aww, man.

I dunno, I kinda wanted to be the one to make him do that...

But I guess White beat me to it.

"I don't know what happened, but it sounds to me like White got you good, huh? Well, isn't that a shame? Serves you right."

When I give him a well-deserved mocking, the frozen Omega suddenly swings back into action.

I jump back, avoiding an obvious, anger-driven punch.

"You mad? Ooh, you mad? What a short temper you have. Maybe you need to get more calcium? See, this is the problem with you scrawny shut-in types."

The more I taunt it, the more the Omega comes at me way too directly.

"Damn it! Blast it all! Where did my calculations go wrong? That accursed thing defies all logic!"

Potimas's cursing echoes in vain.

Such a fragile ego.

This man is a weakling, though I already knew that.

The only reason he seemed strong is because he had only ever fought opponents who were weaker than himself.

It wasn't that he was strong, but that they were less strong than he was.

That's why he was able to stay on top.

And why he was able to flaunt his confidence for so long.

But I know the truth.

Deep down, he's weaker than anyone else.

Because he was always weaker than everyone, he wanted power more than anyone else.

That's how he ended up here.

He thought he was strong, that he had gotten stronger than anyone, but he's still just a weak little man.

Now that he's fighting White, someone who's stronger than him, the façade has slipped away to reveal the same weakling he always was.

"What a weakling."

"Excuse me?"

Potimas picks up my muttered words and answers sharply.

"You're weak, Potimas." I didn't really mean for him to hear it, but since he asked, I might as well let him have it.

"Bold words from someone who is content with the temporary power granted by the system."

That isn't the kind of strength or weakness I mean, though.

Not that he would understand even if I explained it.

"Ah, yes, the system. What happened to the power to become a god? I have not become a god at all! But what about that thing? How can this be? Ah, damn it all! Curses!"

At this point, Potimas is just ranting nonsensically. I don't even know what he's saying anymore.

The Omega is moving erratically, too, perhaps influenced by its master's sorry state.

The drill closes in on my face.

I catch it with my teeth.

It makes an unpleasant crunching noise, but I put my strength into my jaw and chomp it to pieces.

"Wait. Wait just a minute! It makes no sense. Why? Why are you still alive?"

Oh?

He finally caught on?

"Why have your wounds healed? How are you evenly matched with the Gloria Ω inside the anti-technique barrier? What's going on here?!"

Took you long enough, dude.

The Omega's drill gave me a serious beating.

It tore into my stomach, pierced my chest, took off an arm, ripped up my legs.

But those wounds have already healed.

"How can this happen?!" Potimas screams. "It cannot be... Or have you become a god now, too?!"

After he's looked down on me for so long, now he thinks I've gone and

achieved his dream of becoming a god before him.

That would probably be the worst humiliation imaginable to Potimas.

“Nope.”

But unfortunately, that’s not the case.

I haven’t become a god.

I can’t.

If it were that easy, I’m sure Potimas would have become a god by now, too.

“I haven’t become a god or anything. But now I can get strong enough to fight a god, if only for a short time. You know the method, too, don’t you?”

The Omega backs away.

It’s like Potimas himself is recoiling away from me.

“Surely not.”

“You guessed it.”

“Have you gone mad?”

Well, that’s not very nice.

I guess it does seem like an insane thing to do from Potimas’s point of view, though.

That’s why I said he’s a weakling.

I’m generally quite weak myself, but I’d like to think I’m at least brave enough to put my life on the line to achieve my goals.

“Humility.”

That’s the new Seven Heavenly Virtues skill I recently picked up.

Its effects temporarily give me the ability to fight with the power of a god.

When the piece of White’s soul known as “former body brain” merged with mine, it increased my soul’s capacity accordingly.

Until then, my soul had long since been filled to bursting, like a cracked vessel on the verge of breaking open.

But then, White’s soul came in as if to mend those cracks.

Thanks to her, I was finally able to acquire new skills for the first time in so long.

I picked up skills like Telepathy, which I had never needed because I’d always been alone... And the last one I acquired was this skill: Humility.

My ace in the hole, which I’ve kept secret from everyone but White.

And I won't hesitate to use it now.
Even if it means burning out this soul of mine to nothingness.

<Humility: n% of the power to reach godhood. Allows the user to temporarily gain strength on par with a god in exchange for consuming the user's soul. In addition, the user will gain the ability to surpass the W system and interfere with the MA field.>

I grab the Omega's head as it tries to regenerate the broken drill and sink my teeth into it.

The bitter taste of metal fills my mouth.

But after a moment, the chewed-up pieces are broken down and dissolved into pure energy.

My Gluttony skill still works just fine inside my mouth.

That means I have to get it into my mouth first, but once it's there, I can break anything down into energy and absorb it.

And although there's only so much energy I can steal with a mouthful, it's probably still more effective than punching the damn thing over and over.

See, I've already figured out what this Omega thing was most likely built for.

At its core, it's designed to fight a god—specifically, Gülie.

It's loaded up with tons of energy in preparation for a long, drawn-out battle.

The sheer amount of energy does most of the talking, and it's tough enough to keep regenerating in an instant no matter how many times you take it down.

That's its whole focus, without any unnecessary features.

Not sure what's up with the drill thing... Potimas's weird tastes, maybe?

...No, I suppose when it comes to physical destruction, a drill is fairly effective.

Then you throw in the anti-technique barrier, and poison gas to exhaust the opponent.

A god is basically just a being with a ridiculous amount of energy.

If that energy is what makes a god a god, then all you have to do is

attack it with something that can keep fighting until it finally runs out of that energy.

Yeah, I get it now.

It's a pretty roundabout method, but it does make sense if you were trying to defeat a god with whatever you've got on hand.

Even with the effects of Humility, it's still giving me a decent fight.

I don't know if this thing would really work against Gülie, but I can certainly tell that Potimas put a ton of thought into this strategy.

But because he's using it against me instead, it's gonna end in failure.

I thrust my hand into the Omega's torso.

And then I activate magic inside its body.

The anti-technique barrier isn't all-powerful, you know.

It doesn't work inside the bodies of living things, most especially allies who need to be able to use conjurings on the inside.

I mean, the Omega's regeneration is a conjuring, too, and if you block that it'd just be a hunk of metal.

So I can still activate magic...inside the Omega's body.

I'm using a level 10 Heresy Magic spell.

It's called Rend Soul.

Heresy Magic directly affects the target's soul, and Rend Soul is a spell that destroys souls entirely.

And I'm hitting the Omega with it from the inside.

The Omega struggles wildly, smacking me in the side.

I hear the unpleasant snap of a cheekbone breaking as I'm sent flying away from the Omega.

Immediately, I land on my feet, braced for another attack.

But instead, it's keeping its distance too, on high alert.

Looks like my attack worked, then.

I knew it would, of course.

Energy is stored in the soul.

Without the vessel of the soul, the energy would leak away.

Gods have especially large souls that can hold massive amounts of energy.

In order to kill a god, you have to either destroy the vessel of their soul or get them to use up all the energy within it.

Potimas chose the latter method.

Or rather, he didn't have any other choice, I guess.
You can also use Rend Soul to destroy a soul directly, like I just did.
But you need the power of the system to do that.
Rend Soul doesn't work without the support of the system.
Even White hasn't been able to recreate its effects.
Potimas can't reproduce Rend Soul without the system's support, either.
That's why he had to take another approach.
Potimas could theoretically use Rend Soul, too, if he just had the elves learn Heresy Magic.
But he would never choose that path.
Because Potimas doesn't even trust the elves.
To him, they're just convenient tools.
And you have to use tools safely.
So he would never let them learn anything that might threaten him in any way.
Heresy Magic is too much of a double-edged sword for him.
The fact that it's working on the Omega is proof of that.
If it works on his ultimate weapon here, I'm sure it would work on Potimas himself, too.
Plus, if he wanted to use it against Gülie, teaching Heresy Magic to one or two elves wouldn't be nearly enough.
He'd probably need several hundred elves to use it together for it to come anywhere near taking Gülie down.
What if he let that many elves learn Heresy Magic, and they rebelled against him?
He would never choose such a risky option.
They say it's lonely at the top, but Potimas takes it to a whole new level.
In his case, he's alone because he wants to be.
He's perfectly content to be locked away in a little miniature garden of his own making.
As long as he can be in charge and do whatever he wants.
Truly, such a small-minded man.
And such a lowlife, too.
"Potimas. How many people's souls did it take to make this Omega thing?"
I'm not expecting much of an answer from Potimas, who's still

muttering senselessly over the speakers.

But I still couldn't help asking.

Energy is stored within the soul.

Since the Omega has energy, that means it must have a soul.

There's a limit to how much energy a single soul can save up, too.

Even someone like Potimas or me can't cross that line.

Meanwhile, this Omega is loaded with enough energy to theoretically fight Gülie.

One person's soul wouldn't be able to hold that much energy.

If he could do that, Potimas would've already become a god long ago.

So this Omega could be infused with several...no, dozens, or maybe even hundreds of people's souls.

All those living souls, reconstructed into this single metal body.

I do pity them.

But I won't show them mercy.

Destroying those souls with Rend Soul means reducing them to nothingness, never to return to the cycle of death and rebirth.

Truly a heretical magic, just as the name suggests.

But I still won't hesitate to carry that out.

I can't afford to spare them, even if I wanted to.

Gluttony, Rend Soul, and the time-limited effects of Humility.

I'll push my way through with these.

"I'm sorry."

Murmuring an apology to the poor souls who were made into this terrible weapon, I take a step forward.

How much time has passed over the course of our back-and-forth battle since then?

It feels like it's been a fairly long time, but I can't say for sure.

For all I know, it only felt that way because my sense of time has been stretched thin, and it was actually just a few minutes or hours.

I've long since lost count of my attacks.

My hand once again strikes the Omega's chest, and my Heresy Magic eradicates another soul within its mechanical frame.

The Omega's metal body spasms once, then stops moving completely.

Even after I pull my hand away, the hole doesn't close up this time, and its body falls to the floor lifelessly.

The clang it makes is surprisingly quiet, like that of a husk that has lost the weight of souls.

It's over.

No...not yet.

This Omega may have been Potimas's last resort, but it wasn't Potimas himself.

None of this is over until I say my parting words over the real Potimas's dead body.

Oof, that was rough, though.

On the outside I still look totally unharmed, but inside I'm a total mess.

The effects of Humility have been wearing away at my soul.

I was able to use the energy I stole from the Omega as a little bit of cushioning, but while it's better than nothing, it's still not much.

What's going to happen when I turn off the effect of Humility?

They say a candle burns brightest right before it goes out, and all that.

Please, just hang on until I finish off Potimas.

"If you're done, come outside."

A voice echoes directly in my head.

A message from White, maybe?

I wish she wouldn't casually do things like that when the anti-technique barrier is still in effect.

You're gonna give me an inferiority complex here.

At any rate, if White went out of her way to call me, I guess I better go outside.

I force open the door that closed when I first came in.

Since it was meant to shut in a literal god, it's no easy feat to move the damn thing.

I wheeze as I finally pry it open, then keep wheezing as I ascend the long slope and step outside.

The sight before my eyes is crazier than I could've imagined, to say the least.

The forest is on fire all over the place.

Most of the flames are coming from these giant round sphere things scattered on the ground.

In the midst of this hellish scene, an even bigger shadow stands out.

It's a huge, disc-shaped thing, blocking out the sky as it flies through the air.

I'm reminded of the ancient weapon that Potimas, the Pontiff, White, and me, among others, had to miraculously team up to bring down.

Potimas is the one who designed that thing, so I guess it makes sense that they look similar.

In short, it looks like a UFO.

You know, the kind from the made-up-sounding stories about aliens or whatever.

But it's probably a fairly accurate way to describe this thing—because it really is a spaceship.

Potimas knows the shape this planet is in, of course.

He only stays in a place that's essentially a house built on sand because of the system.

I know he was talking down about it just a few minutes ago, but that's only because it failed to meet his expectations.

Potimas had high hopes for the system.

He thought it could make him into a god.

Potimas never became a god, but he still stayed on this planet in the faint hope that he might still be able to do it one day with the help of the system.

But I'm sure he knew that the chances of that were slim.

So of course he would have something prepared.

A means of escaping from this planet.

Potimas could leave the planet anytime he wants.

That's why he's able to stay so calm even if the world is on the verge of destruction.

And obviously, the thing floating up there is his escape plan.

However, the escape plan in question is currently being held in place by white threads.

It looks just like a fly that's been caught in a spiderweb, and can do nothing but wait to be devoured.

In fact, that's so on the nose that I can't help but grin.

You're really something else, White.

This is what you were up to while I was messing around with that Omega?

It's so impressive, "good job" doesn't begin to cut it.

I have no doubt that the real Potimas is in there.

He must have realized that things had gone south beyond any possible recovery and abandoned the Omega to make a break for it.

No matter how much time and effort it took to build, the Omega was still just one more tool to Potimas.

If he had to choose between that and his own life, he wouldn't even think twice about it.

One of the threads holding the spaceship in place is attached to the ground right next to me.

It's thick enough that a person could walk on it without a problem.

I glance around, but I don't see White anywhere.

Still, since this thread looks like an open invitation to walk up it onto the spaceship, I'm sure that's exactly what she intended.

So I climb onto the thread and use it to start ascending.

I feel like I've been doing a lot of ascending in the past few minutes...

I was worried that the spaceship might shoot at me or something, but soon I reach it without incident.

Maybe White has rendered it powerless already.

Hopping on top of the spaceship, I look around for a hatch.

Before long, I find it, pull it open with yet another show of force, and go inside.

It's shockingly dark inside the spaceship.

There's no light at all.

Not that it matters, since I've got the Night Vision skill.

I walk forward.

Since this thing is so huge, the corridors are stupidly long.

I keep walking.

Behind panes of glass, there's an area that looks like a factory, and another that looks like a farm, and so on.

It's probably set up so that anything a person might need can be provided within the spaceship.

After all, it could easily be roaming through outer space for hundreds of years.

Maybe Potimas stayed on this planet not just because he had hopes for the system, but also out of fear of the unknown future that awaited beyond

it.

Gülie is the only god on this planet, but there might be much more of them on other planets.

That's not something you'd want to mess around with.

I keep walking.

Some robot guards pop out, but they're ridiculously weak compared to what I fought underground not long ago.

I take them down easily.

Fighting these other robots, it's even clearer to me that the Omega I fought was a specially made model.

I keep walking.

A Potimas clone attacks me, bellowing oddly.

Its handsomely chiseled features are twisted grotesquely with fear and panic.

Until now, even if one of Potimas's clones was killed, its composed expression never wavered like this.

He didn't care how many clones he had to give up, but I guess having his real body killed is a different story.

I mean, obviously.

I quickly finish off the clone that attacks me.

At this point, even if it's strengthened with mechanical parts, I'm long past letting a mere clone stop me.

"Basically, you're screwed."

I keep walking, and when I finally reach the end, I find it.

An elderly elf, inside a transparent cylinder.

Countless tubes are attached to the elf's body.

The old elf doesn't move at all; maybe it's somehow frozen with special materials inside the cylinder or something.

But while the body doesn't move, the speakers are spewing out desperate screams.

"Stop! No, no, don't do it! I don't want it to end! No, it can't end here! I must go on living eternally! I beg you! Please stop!"

Endless pleas for me to stop flow from the speaker, mingled with wordless screams.

I guess you can keep screaming forever if you don't have to breathe.

As far as Potimas is concerned, a body is just a receptacle for life, so it

doesn't matter what state it's in as long as it's still living.

If he wants to move, he can just use a clone.

The flesh inside of this cylinder, living but not moving an inch, is Potimas's actual body.

I had imagined it might look something like this, but seeing it with my own eyes, it's really quite pitiful.

The lifespan of an elf is long, but it's not infinite.

Potimas has lived far, far longer than an elf's natural lifespan.

So I figured he was probably keeping himself alive through rather extreme methods.

And now, the man who has so desperately pursued eternity for the sole purpose of clinging to life...is about to meet his end.

"I don't want to die! I don't want to die! Noooo! I don't wanna diiiiiiie!"

"Sorry, Potimas, but I'm afraid you're going to meet a fate worse than death."

I have no sympathy for Potimas as he continues shrieking.

But I'm not quite in the mood to rub it in his face, either.

I always imagined that I might be overcome with some feeling or other when the time came, but I'm actually shocked at how little emotion I feel.

"Abyss Magic."

Hearing my quiet murmur, Potimas screams even more madly.

Abyss Magic is quite unique.

While Heresy Magic destroys the soul, Abyss Magic dismantles the soul and returns it to the system.

Just killing him wouldn't be enough.

I'm going to make him pay this world back with his very soul.

I start preparing Abyss Magic.

Unlike Heresy Magic, Abyss Magic spells require a complicated construction.

I'm sure the great D made it that way on purpose.

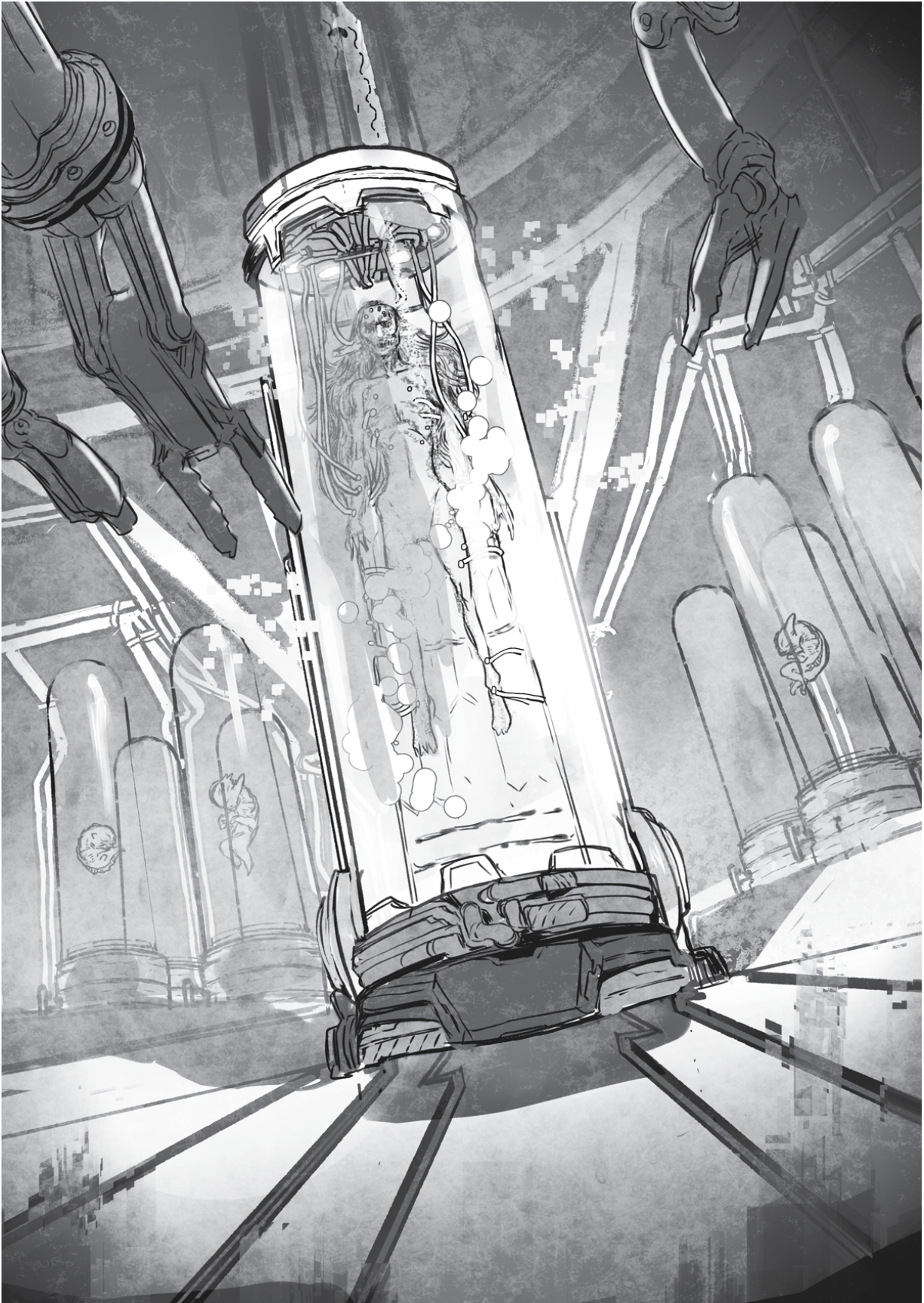
Heresy Magic was designed to oppose gods.

But Abyss Magic was made for the people of this world to pass judgment on one another.

It steals away the option of being reborn and sentences the transgressor to be returned to the system.

In essence, it means that person has been judged to be more use to the

world by being restored to it as energy than by being reborn.





Personally, I think that's why it takes so long to activate, making it a poor fit for use in battle.

This man has lived a very long time indeed.

He must have saved up a great deal of energy, enough that returning his entire soul to the system would be of some use.

At the very least, I'm sure he has the Immortality skill.

There's no way he wouldn't, since his ultimate desire is eternal life.

Immortality costs an insane amount of skill points, and therefore requires a lot of energy.

It would be a waste not to put that energy to good use.

Not that I think that could possibly begin to atone for all his sins.

"Damn it! Damn it all! If only I could have unlocked the secret to your perpetual youth! Damn you! Damn yooooou!"

Potimas unleashes a bitter volley of screams.

For some reason, I don't age.

I don't know if it's because Potimas's experiment succeeded, or an effect of the system, or something else.

But whatever the case may be, I somehow attained perpetual youth, the primary goal of the eternal life Potimas always desired.

Maybe that's why he's always been especially cruel to me.

Jealousy, I guess.

But it doesn't make much difference how eternally youthful my body might be.

Because I'm reaching the limits of the lifespan of my soul, not my physical body.

And I'm sure I'm not the only one.

...Most likely, Potimas has been feeling the limits of his soul, too, just like me.

It looks like he succeeded in artificially keeping his body alive, but the soul can't be fooled so easily.

Like mine, his soul has probably been weakening under the weight of the overgrown skills and stats we've accumulated over far too many years.

His physical body might be reaching its limits, too, but either way, Potimas sensed that his time was growing short.

So he started to panic.

I'm sure that's why he's been particularly active these past few years.

He must have agreed to take in the reincarnations in the hopes of finding some clue to extend his lifespan.

Maybe he thought one of their unique skills would be able to grant his wish.

Unfortunately for him, it's not that simple.

But he still refused to give up, kept struggling, and ultimately ended up like this.

Running away from death, always running...

"....."

Suddenly, a question occurs to me, and I open my mouth.

But judging by the endless, meaningless yelling coming from the speakers, I doubt Potimas would be able to give me the answer I want.

In fact, there's probably no point asking the question at all.

"Was there really any meaning to a life you spent fleeing death?"

I guess it's better not to ask...

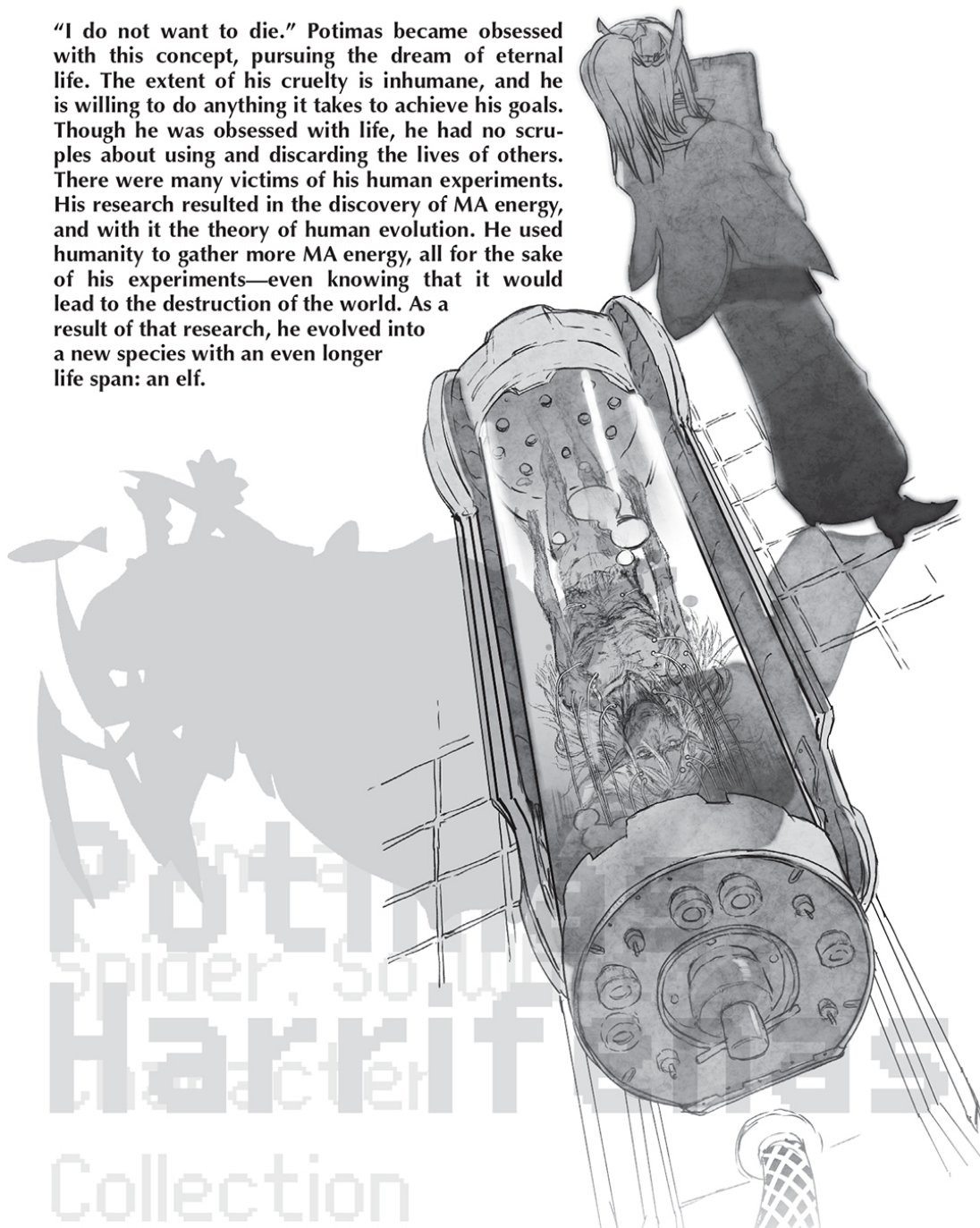
"Goodbye, Father."

As the real Potimas goes on screaming, no longer forming any words with meaning, I direct the Abyss Magic toward him and activate it.

Then all that remains is silence.

POTIMAS HARRIFENAS

"I do not want to die." Potimas became obsessed with this concept, pursuing the dream of eternal life. The extent of his cruelty is inhumane, and he is willing to do anything it takes to achieve his goals. Though he was obsessed with life, he had no scruples about using and discarding the lives of others. There were many victims of his human experiments. His research resulted in the discovery of MA energy, and with it the theory of human evolution. He used humanity to gather more MA energy, all for the sake of his experiments—even knowing that it would lead to the destruction of the world. As a result of that research, he evolved into a new species with an even longer life span: an elf.





RUMINATE: THUS HISTORY MOVES AGAIN

The creation of the system was a major turning point in this world's history.

...When it was first constructed, D gave me a script and forced me to read it, and it was broadcast to everyone in the world.

Let the record show that those were things D made me say, not my own thoughts.

Ahem! Let us not delve any deeper into that incident.

At any rate, when the system was instated, this world changed dramatically.

Sariel, dragons, and humans...

The delicate balance that kept the world running was completely upended when D appeared.

It may sound wrong to say that the world became D's plaything, but it did indeed belong to her from that point on.

As a result, no other gods could interfere with this world.

None of them would ever be reckless enough to meddle in D's domain.

Thus, though our world became a plaything, it was also placed under D's protection.

In that chaotic sequence of events, humans used up MA energy, and brought the planet to the brink of destruction.

The dragons left a massive scar on the world and absconded, and Sariel tried to sacrifice herself to save it.

Though ultimately, it seems the device Potimas supposedly prepared to save the world would not have actually had that effect.

Hmm? What now?

Could Sariel not have seen through that lie, you ask?

...Well, you see, Sariel technically specializes in combat.

To put it bluntly, she is something of a muscle head...

I doubt Sariel would have understood the particulars of the conjurings built into Potimas's technology.

At any rate, when she activated the device, D interfered and whisked her away as the core of the system. Otherwise, she would have died for nothing.

And Potimas alone would have reaped the benefits.

...Truly, what an unforgiveable act.

Think of how Sariel felt when she offered herself up as a sacrifice, how the children of the orphanage felt when they said goodbye to her...

Even Dustin's determination, too.

Potimas's plan made a mockery of all their noble feelings.

Inexcusable. Completely intolerable!

...And yet, I am forbidden from interfering with Potimas.

"We administrators are supposed to observe and make adjustments. Just like real gods, wouldn't you say? So you mustn't try to kill a particular individual, I'm afraid. Sariel wouldn't want that either, would she?"

That is what D said to me...

No doubt she thought things would be more amusing if Potimas was alive.

D thinks of this world as a source of entertainment, through and through.

If I had chosen to erase Potimas anyway, I know not what might have happened to Sariel and the system.

So in the end, I did nothing.

Although I did get to give Potimas a warning, at least.

If you do anything extreme, I told him, I will kill you.

If you try to leave this planet, I will kill you.

I must say, this threat worked extremely well.

Thanks to that, he holed up in the barrier of the elf village and could no longer attempt such large-scale schemes.

In truth, I could not do anything to Potimas under D's orders, but he did not need to know that.

Besides, even if I could not harm Potimas himself, I could at least crack down on any excessive mechanical weapons and so on.

While I could not destroy the root of the problem, I could at least interfere with his actions.

After all, Potimas could still destroy the world if he were so inclined.

I am sure I was at least of some use in deterring him.

...At least, I must tell myself that much, or I cannot go on.

Being an administrator is a very stressful position.

Which is why I occasionally try to mix things up.

Namely, by making a second body for myself and mingling with human life.

Like what I am currently doing as Hyrince.

Living as a human brings a fresh new perspective, and insight I never would have gained from the outside.

And living as I please as an ordinary human, instead of an administrator, is certainly freeing.

Besides, by coming into such close contact with humanity, I have come to feel willing to forgive them.

It became clear to me that they, too, are doing their best to live their lives.

I have been a merchant, a farmer, an adventurer.

In all my many different lives as a human, I have inevitably had many fortuitous encounters.

Of course I sometimes met unpleasant humans as well, but in almost every life I have lived, I was always able to make at least one human friend who I could trust completely.

In the case of Hyrince, I suppose that would be Julius.

Yaana, Jeskan, Hawkin... Meeting all of them was a blessing, too, but it only happened because I met Julius first.

It really was a coincidence that Hyrince's childhood friend Julius became the hero.

Normally, I would never attempt to get close with the hero, a human with particularly strong influence on the world, but this time I happened to get involved and ended up meddling a bit.

I simply could not leave him to his own devices.

That ability to draw people in was probably Julius's greatest strength.

...He truly was a great person.

Which is why I dearly hoped he would be happy, but alas...

Still, I doubt my past self would believe I might ever come to wish happiness on a human.

But so much time has passed that it would be difficult to carry on being

angry all this time.

I think it has been long enough that I, and this world, can forgive the humans.

Whatever she might say, I believe Ariel does not truly hate humans very much, deep down.

...Or perhaps that is just my wishful thinking.

But Ariel has been watching over this world for as long as I have.

She too had enough power to wreak destruction on humanity, if not as much as Potimas.

The fact that she did not do so seems like answer enough to me.

Amid the children of that highly unusual orphanage, Ariel was once the quietest and most ordinary of them all.

No matter how much power she has gained, deep down she is still a kindhearted girl who could never do anything so monstrous.

But now, I have allowed her to be stuck with the role of demon lord...

I truly hoped that she could live a quiet and peaceful life, too...

Nothing ever turns out the way I want.

Sariel, Julius, Ariel...

Everyone I have wished happiness on has drawn the short end of the stick and suffered in some terrible way.

...But it seems that, too, is coming to an end soon.

While I have only been able to stand by and do nothing for so many long centuries, that creature has brought about dramatic changes in this world in just a few short years.

There is no stopping it at this point.

I do not know what form this ending will take.

No, I will not wish for a perfect ending in which everyone and everything is saved.

I cannot.

We have already lost far too much for that dream to ever reach fruition.

But if I may wish for as many to be saved as possible...

Then I will pray.

And if praying alone is not enough, then...

Then I shall have to prepare myself.

The time may yet come when even I am forced to act, after being dormant and useless for so long.

Do I even have the right to act now, when I have never done so before?

I cannot say those doubts do not plague me, but the time has come to forget such thoughts.

Ariel and the others have been drawing the short end of the stick for so long.

The time has come for me to draw a lot of my own.

No matter what might happen to me because of it.



END OF BATTLE: SHE WHO WALKS WITH THE LORD

My clone that's monitoring the system informed me that the slot for Diligence opened up.

I immediately arrange to fill the empty Ruler Privilege slot, careful to adjust so that there's no effect on the operation of the system.

On top of that, I force myself into the newly opened slot.

Now I only need one more slot.

If the Diligence slot opened, that must mean that Potimas has died.

Or I guess it's more like he was erased.

What kind of karma is it that Potimas, who continued to live only because he didn't want to die, met a fate far worse than death in the end?

Honestly, it's almost *too* fitting.

But for a guy who committed so many heinous crimes, his end was honestly pretty quick.

When I think about all the things he's done, I can't help feeling like the Demon Lord should have tortured him more before hitting him with the Abyss Magic.

I guess maybe she just wanted him gone as soon as possible.

Somehow I get the feeling that's not really it, but I don't think anyone but the Demon Lord could understand how she really feels about the whole thing.

Their history was way too deep and complicated.

Even I can't guess what she must be feeling.

I step into the UFO that I trapped with my threads.

This thing popped out after I brought down the sea urchin swarm and the pyramid.

Based on the timing, I had a feeling this thing was Potimas's actual final fortress, so I just captured it instead of destroying it. Apparently, that was

the right call.

I would honestly be shocked if there was still yet another trick up his sleeve after this.

At that point, I'd have to give Potimas even more credit.

But since the real Potimas is dead now, I guess that must have been the last trick after all.

When I finally reach the end of a pointlessly long corridor, I find the Demon Lord sitting in a chair, messing around with some kind of console in front of her.

"It's over," she informs me without turning around.

"I see."

She's probably got some serious inner turmoil going on after finally putting an end to such a long struggle.

Judging by her detached tone, I'd be willing to guess that she's so overcome with different emotions that she can't even sort out her own feelings.

Sometimes, when you've got too many strong feelings, you end up feeling emotionless instead, y'know?

"Look at this."

The Demon Lord points at the monitor.

Skimming over the text there, I find something pretty unpleasant.

A deification experiment using reincarnations' souls to become a god, huh?

To sum up the long-winded theory or whatever, the idea is basically to shove the souls of a bunch of reincarnations into a target and see what happens.

Potimas had figured out he couldn't become a god with the system's power alone.

No matter how many souls he collected in the form of experience points, he could never break through the limit.

So he decided to try a different kind of experience point grind—namely, the souls of people who came from a different world—and see if that might be able to break through his soul's limitations.

Talk about stupid.

I'm sorry, but come on.

I hate to say it, but I definitely don't see that working out well.

You can't break through the limit by gathering souls from this world.

So let's just use souls from a different world instead!

...Yeah, if it were that easy to become a god, lots of people would do it.

Although I guess I'm not one to talk, since I became a god by accident...

But this is why he was gathering the reincarnations, huh?

Poor Ms. Oka, who's been trying so hard for their sake...

"Well, I imagine Potimas didn't really think this would work to turn him into a god either, y'know? It was just a tiny possibility."

"But it looks like he put a whole lot of effort into carefully researching the theory and making equipment for it...?"

"That's just how Potimas does things."

The text on the screen displays thorough records of machinery in development, equations for the experiments, and so on.

From the looks of it, the reason he made a point of preventing the reincarnations from picking up skills in their everyday life is so their souls wouldn't adapt to this world and be altered, or something.

I dunno, it seems like a painful amount of effort to put into an experiment with astronomically small chances of succeeding.

Did he really want to be a god that badly?

Yeah, I guess he did...

"We're lucky he was so extra-cautious that he didn't actually get around to executing it. If we'd given him another year, he might've finished the equipment and thrown all those reincarnations into a blender."

Please don't say scary stuff like that.

She's totally right, though.

This time, it worked out in our favor that Potimas was always so careful.

After all, he does have a track record of actually trying to put the goddess Sariel into a blender and use her for parts.

"There's tons of records of Potimas's other experiments here, too."

"Whoa," I can't help but say aloud.

Potimas's research materials.

I bet there's all kinds of nasty stuff in there.

"So I'm just gonna take a quick look over everything and then destroy it."

"Yeah, that's probably for the best."

Letting stuff like this stick around would cause nothing but trouble.

If anything, I don't think there's even any need for the Demon Lord to check it over first.

"So that's the deal here, anyway. What about on your end?"

"Who do you think you're talking to, hmm?"

I totally nailed it, obviously.

I've already recovered the remains of the sea urchins, the pyramid, and so on.

I put out the fires so they wouldn't spread to the rest of the forest, too.

Not to mention I completely blew up the secret base that was hidden underground.

Oh yeah, and...

"Ms. Oka is the only elf left alive."

All of the elves have been obliterated.

After I captured this UFO in my web, I hunted down the last of the elves with my clones.

There are some half-elves and quarter-elves and so on remaining, but there are no more pureblood elves anywhere in this world.

"Gotcha. So once we get rid of this spaceship, it's really over, huh?"

"Feeling emotional?"

"A bit."

That said, looking at her in profile, the Demon Lord looks quieter than usual.

"Oh yeah. Hey, I kept my promise."

Promise?

Oh, right. I made her promise to stay alive.

"I completed my mission safely, boss."

The Demon Lord spins around in her chair and throws me a jovial salute.

Safely, huh...?

"Can you really call that safe?"

"Hey, as long as I didn't die."

The Demon Lord smiles.

Yeah, right. She's so close to death, she can't even get out of that chair.

The Demon Lord has no physical injuries.

But there's a very deep wound, not on her body, but on her soul.

Her presence used to carry so much weight, but now she seems incredibly frail.

“How bad is it?”

“Hmm. Once I get some rest, I’m pretty sure I’ll be able to get around enough that it won’t hinder my everyday life, anyway. The only reason I can’t move right now is ’cause my magic’s all dried up. Once I recover that, I’ll at least be able to walk again.”

“In other words, you can’t fight.”

“Sure I can, if you don’t mind me shortening my lifespan even further.”

“Demon Lord...”

“C’mon, I’m just kidding. Either way, I don’t have much time left. I’d say maybe a year or so. So I’ll be using the last of my life to see things through with my own eyes.”

Even before this, the Demon Lord’s lifespan was growing short.

But I’m sure she still had a while left to go.

And now, after she shortened it in that battle, she’s only got a year.

“My role ends here. I would’ve liked to keep at it a little longer, but I’ll have to leave the rest to you, White.”

“Got it.”

“So, you’re going to get started, yeah?”

I nod at the Demon Lord’s question.

We’ve taken care of Potimas, the enemy of the world.

The next part of the story is saving the world.

But while I’m going to save the world, I never said I would save the humans.

So from this point on, I’ll be playing the part of the enemy of humanity.

Now, then, time to destroy humanity and save the world and the goddess.

Even if that goes against the goddess’s wishes.

AFTERWORD

Happy New Year! I'm Okina Baba!

Last year was rough, so I'm really hoping this year will be a good one.

Especially since the anime has finally started!

Yes, that's right! The anime adaptation has begun airing. Please be sure to watch it!

By the time this book is on sale, I bet people will already be talking about the first episode. Just thinking about it makes my heart pound!

Wha?! Could this be love?! (Not exactly...)

It's not love per se, but I hope the anime will bring feelings of heart-pounding excitement to all the viewers.

Now then, since I don't have much space left (page number-wise) this time around, let's jump to some abbreviated thank-yous!

Tsukasa Kiryuu-sensei, the illustrator.

Asahiro Kakashi-sensei, the manga adaptation artist.

Gratinbird-sensei, the author of the spinoff comic.

Everyone who's involved in the creation of the anime.

My editor W, and everyone else who helped bring this book into the world.

All of you who have picked up this book.

And last but not least, the viewers of the anime!

Thank you from the bottom of my heart.



So I'm a Spider, So What?

Art:
Asahiro Kakashi

Original Story:
Okina Baba

Character Design:
Tsukasa Kiryu

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